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Analyzing Discursive Constructions of Community in Newspaper Articles

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Highlights

- Fleshes out a means of analyzing dominant discourse.
- Offers considerations for the development of counter-hegemony.
- Demonstrates the use of critical media studies for community psychologists.

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Abstract The manner by which power is reified through newspaper reporting can assist community psychologists in getting a handle on the complex, often contradictory, ways by which ideology and power are constituted in relation to particular communities. Accordingly, the present study draws on discursive psychology to analyse how 377 newspaper articles construct the community of Thembelihle (a low-income community in South Africa) and how these constructions can inform counter-hegemonic strategy. Two discourses were identified in the analysis, Signifying Legitimacy and Containing the Protest Community. Where the Signifying Legitimacy discourse established a Statist legitimacy-illegitimacy binary against which Thembelihle was to be assessed, the Containing the Protest Community discourse constructed Thembelihle as a monolithic entity that enacted a wholly violent, and often directionless, mode of protest violence which was concerned with little more than ‘service delivery’. Together, these discourses suggest to us the manner by which low-income communities are engaged by the State as well as how Statist representations function materially. Certainly, most newspaper articles relied on an interpretive frame whose hermeneutics were characterised primarily by violence and homogenously experienced suffering. Such representation, we argue, signifies the dominant discursive field and ideology

against which counter-hegemonic strategy and (re) presentation must act.

Keywords Newspapers · Discursive psychology · Community · South Africa · Discourse · Violence

Introduction

It is perhaps pertinent to ask why community psychologists should study newspapers. While newspapers are not in every instance a hegemonic, or entirely monolithic, ideological State apparatus, they are able to, in very particular and often implicit ways, “manufacture public consent” to specific kinds of social ordering, all while appearing impartial and objective (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). Newspapers represent an especially potent kind of ideological depository and frequently establish the terms of engagement and the definitions by which communities are discursively formulated, both in formalized politics and the broader political unconscious (see Jacobs, 2019). As newspapers represent important determinants in the shaping of public consciousness, political agendas, public opinion, and government policy (Howley, 2010), the reification of power (oppressive, soft, oppositional, and popular) through newspaper reporting renders newspaper articles ideal for assisting community psychologists in getting a handle on the highly complex, often contradictory, ways by which ideology and power are disseminated through discourse to construct particular communities (see Martín-Baró, 1994). Newspapers thus serve as relevant and meaningful research data because, despite media audiences all over the world—including South Africa (Jacobs,

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2019)—consuming much of their news through television, newspapers typically have a larger staff and network of journalists than television programmes, which means that most televised news programming relies on newspaper reports (Dorfman, Thorson, & Stevens, 2001). For community psychologists, analyzing newspapers can afford critical insights into how dominant currents of power embed themselves in discourse and act to valorize, demonize and/or invisibilize different communities for a range of ideological purposes (Rappaport, 1995; Van Dijk, 2006).

In this article, we explore what community psychologists can offer to media studies, and vice versa. Indeed, community psychology is able to approach newspaper studies from a set of disciplinary perspectives, methods, and epistemologies (e.g., those articulated by the liberation psychology paradigm, including psychosocial analytical approaches) that are rarely considered within media studies. We may then apply these insights to examining how hegemonic representation influences the psycho-materiality of community life. Following this, community psychologists are able to connect media theory with grassroots counterhegemonic community-building initiatives which make visible the discursive and material power differentials written into the notion of community. Indeed, community psychologists tend to involve themselves in existing community activity (political and otherwise) in greater part than those working in many of the other psychodisciplines. Therefore, we wish to argue that in working with and for communities, media studies and community psychology are able to enter into a mutually beneficial conversation. In advancing this argument, we analyze how South African newspapers construct Thembelihle (a low-income community located in south-west Johannesburg) and draw on our findings to consider how community psychologists can use newspapers to inform community resistance tactics and counterhegemonic strategy.

In what follows, we examine some of the canonized work located in cultural and media studies. As the present study is situated in the contemporary South African context, this literature will focus primarily on capitalist liberal democracy, rather than centralized or socialist economies. From here, as a way of considering the discursive context in which Thembelihle is positioned, we offer a number of historically-situated remarks on South African newspapers. Finally, after outlining the study's aims, method, and theoretical framework, we analyze how Thembelihle has been discursively constructed in newspaper articles and the implications that this has for critical community psychology work concerned with power, ideology, and counterhegemony.

News Media, Community, and Society

The Propaganda Model

Critical community psychologists have called for fluid conceptions of power that interrogate power's ever-shifting, psychological, material, and political constitution (Fisher, Sonn, & Evans, 2007). Although power exists between people, it is concentrated among those who have the greatest access to material resources (Martín-Baró, 1994). In having access to resources, these powerful social classes are able to exercise their ideological interests through dominant discourse (Van Dijk, 2006). Indeed, power is central to the functioning of all forms of communication (Williams, 2016). Corporate news media in particular are able to determine, on a large scale, what we think about communities, how we think about them, potential courses for action, and what the possibilities and limitations are for policy formation (Dorfman & Gonzalez, 2012).

Herman and Chomsky (2010) propose the Propaganda Model as a means of understanding how news media function as a market-oriented form of coercion (i.e., soft or discursive power). Briefly, the Propaganda Model espouses five filters, each of which work together to contribute to editorial biases in news media reports. The first of these filters is known as Ownership and denotes how news media organizations cater to the financial interests of those who own them. The Ownership filter emphasizes the tremendous influence that particular multinational corporations (e.g., *Disney*, *NewsCorp*, *Time-Warner*, *Viacom*, and *Bertelsmann*) have on news production (Howley, 2005). The second filter, Advertising, draws attention to the costs of production, with news items functioning primarily as a way of directing consumers' attention to advertisements. Unlike newspapers that were printed prior to the First World War, which received the majority of their funding from political parties, newspapers printed today are far more dependent on advertising revenue (Williams, 2016). Third, the Sourcing filter refers to the different sources—selected or approved of by funders—from which news media reports draw. Time pressure and the constant need to use “authoritative sources” result in most media over-accessing those in powerful and privileged institutional positions, thus reproducing within news reports existing patterns of dominant power (Hall, Chritcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). The fourth filter, Flak, accounts for negative responses to media statements, such as complaints and lawsuits, which can become costly to news media outlets. Flak influences the kinds of stories that are published and afforded attention in the media. Finally, the Anti-communism filter (which

was later renamed “Fear” to accommodate the ideological make-up of a post-Cold War world) includes the construction of an external enemy (which usually signifies the antithesis to capitalist values) onto which people’s social grievances can be placed.

While the Propaganda Model does not tell the whole story of how newspapers work (ideologically and discursively) within specific community contexts, it is able to guide our understanding of newspapers in society, as well as the social, material, and psychological consequences of news reporting. For community psychologists, the Propaganda Model is able to point toward how different communities are discursively “made” within public consciousness, and what this means for the exercise of power within and against these communities (see Fisher et al., 2007). Considered together, then, the Propaganda Model’s five filters can help us to see how news media form part of the communities that they seek to “objectively” describe (Williams, 2016).

News Values

A critical understanding of power within newspaper reports requires that community psychologists incorporate news framing into how we analyze community issues. This means that we should look beyond the latent content of newspapers and toward contextual cues and other salient features of newspaper reporting (Dorfman et al., 2001). The determination of news values which, in turn, determine newsworthiness, is important here (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). Traditional news values include timeliness, impact, violence, consequence, human interest, and conflict (Dorfman et al., 2001). However, as nothing is inherently newsworthy, newsworthiness *comes to be* through a complex, but nonetheless consciously constructed, set of criteria to which newspaper articles adhere in different ways for different purposes (Hall et al., 1978). There are numerous discursive and formal strategies—some of which are outlined in the Propaganda Model—that newspaper articles utilize to enhance their newsworthiness, including: positioning (i.e., centering sensational items); emphasizing the supposed authority of a news source; using evaluative language; referencing negative emotions and actions; intensifying certain news items; relying on repetition; and using lyrical language, such as metaphor and simile (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). The kinds of newsworthiness created from these strategies work through discourse to shape public perceptions of which communities matter, and which do not. For instance, Dutta (2018) demonstrates how dominant discourse oftentimes robs low-income communities of agency, defining them by their “deficits” and vulnerabilities exclusively, which may, in turn, filter into how community psychologists engage with these communities.

Hall et al. (1978) describe how “signification spiral” in the news acts to link different events in ways that make them especially meaningful, potentially escalating people’s sense of threat or crisis. Violence within community contexts may, in this regard, be represented and interpreted as decontextualized, uncontrollable, and faceless, often creating a reactionary or siege mentality among different audiences (Seedat, 1999). A nebulous conception of violence thus comes to define communities as wholly negative (see Dutta, 2018), which can influence how government, community psychologists, and the wider public engage with different communities. Here, the Fear filter draws on genuine and materially-rooted social anxieties as a means of constructing enemies whose essence is determined by elite social groups. Martín-Baró (1994), writing in 1980s El Salvador, notes that media discourses drew selectively from the public’s desire for safety and stability as a means of constructing State violence as working to bring about such safety and stability. Dominant ideology, in this way, speaks to, rather than represents people’s needs and desires (Eagleton, 1991), re-directing public anger toward vulnerable members of society instead of oppressive social systems (Herman & Chomsky, 2010), which can have violent consequences within community contexts (Dreher, 2003).

The discursive coordinates of newsworthiness are also determined by the elite social groups who own or—through advertising—fund, newspapers (Dreher, 2003). Hall et al. (1978) argue that these powerful groups become “primary definers” through their ability to crystallize issues that they deem important; provide information which supports preferred interpretations of these issues; and rely on the disorganized state of public knowledge to generate tacit agreement among media audiences (Hall, 1987). We can, in different ways, see within community contexts the material consequences of how primary definers exercise power in the determination of newsworthiness. Dreher (2003), for instance, describes how, following the attacks directed at the United States on September 11th, 2001, including those on Manhattan’s World Trade Center, Australian news media tended to scrutinize Muslim communities living in Australia, which resulted in an uptick of Islamophobic violence and harassment in the country. News values and newsworthiness, therefore, carry with them material effects which are, themselves, constituted by broader structures of domination.

Media, Community, and Violence

The manner by which communities are discursively engaged by newspapers has been under-explored (Ward

et al., 2012). However, what seems clear is that mainstream media, including newspapers, tend to construct community in either wholly “positive” or “negative” terms. Yet, what appears to have changed in today’s media landscape—as opposed to earlier epochs (Butchart & Seedat, 1990)—is that affluent areas are rarely described as “communities” and are, instead, more often described as “suburbs” (see Ngonyama ka Sigogo & Modipa, 2004). “Community” is usually used to refer to poor areas. These areas are often racialized through particular terms that stand in for “community”, such as “settlement” or “township.” In South Africa, such communities typically infer areas populated by those categorized as “Black,” “Coloured,” and “Indian” under apartheid. Thus, whether used in a wholly positive or negative sense, the notion of community within media can serve as a euphemism for racialized and classed separate development. In South Africa, what were “Bantustans” under apartheid may now be referred to as “communities,” “townships,” or “settlements” (Butchart & Seedat, 1990).

Constructions of community in the media can serve to attribute inhumane living conditions to the very character of particular communities, ignoring broader histories and systems of violence (Dorfman et al., 2001; Dutta, 2018; Suffla, Malherbe, & Seedat, 2020). Such dehumanization occurs by constructing the “Other” as an essentially violent object to be handled in a manner that is instrumental and that disregards the physical and/or psychological well-being of the community (Čehajić, Brown, & González, 2009), all of which have implications for the work of community psychologists. Esses, Medianu, and Lawson (2013) found that those communities which comprise low-status groups were more likely to be consistently dehumanized and established as expendable in media discourse. Similarly, in their study, Mahtani and Mountz (2001) found that positive attitudes toward immigration in Canada were rendered especially negative after being exposed to unfavorable media constructions of immigrant communities. Dalsklev and Kunst (2015) reported that newspaper articles which focused on a particular negative group identity lead to greater dehumanization of that group/community, often exaggerating already existing antagonisms. Indeed, media reports of marginalized communities are able to justify systemic inequalities (Esses et al., 2013), all while naturalizing—and therefore also evading moral accountability for—such inequality.

Affluent or middle-class communities (the so-called “suburbs”) are rarely covered in newspapers as the very existence of these communities conforms most readily to a liberal politics of respectability. Conversely, low-income communities (so-called “townships” or “settlements”), with whom community psychologists most frequently work, tend to become newsworthy only by breaking

through this respectability, such as through protest (Duncan, 2016). Certainly, poorer communities rarely enter into news media discourse as a result of the wretched social conditions imposed onto them. Instead, it is when residents of these communities disrupt the liberal social order that they are reported on in the news. In other words, it is usually only when communities are understood as “violent” that they are considered newsworthy. As news readers are often removed from these communities, newspapers provide the general population with particular ways of understanding communities as well as community violence (Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, & Nicholson, 2013; Seedat, 1999), that is, as wholly representative of and responsible for the violence by which they are being defined. For some readers, news media constructions serve as their primary, if not their only, engagement with poor and working-class communities and the issues that are most pertinent to these communities (Martín-Baró, 1994). Such disparaging images of disenfranchised communities can function to establish the prototype of the “Other” against which constructions of the virtuous self are evaluated (Dalsklev & Kunst, 2015).

However, news media should not be considered as a monolithic entity and can, at times, accommodate appeals for justice as part of their advertising revenue. In South Africa, as is the case elsewhere, this is typically referred to as “corporate social responsibility” and often includes a community-engagement component (Fourie & Terre Blanche, 2018). Furthermore, various philanthropic groups and organizations that are not aligned with the government frequently use mainstream news media platforms to mobilize public funds toward—and social support for—various community concerns (Seedat, 1999). Community voices may, therefore, appear in news discourse, even if only sporadically, and this can result in material changes in people’s lives. We can then say that newspapers employ different hermeneutics of violence when covering communities, whereby violence—attributed to various social actors and situations—can be interpreted as systemic, interpersonal, oppressive, liberatory, banal, expected, unjust, reactionary, pointless, unnecessary, and/or misguided (see Suffla et al., 2020). A multitude of violences may then come to define low-income communities through a discursive prism of violence, that is, representations of these communities which seek to link interpretations or inferences of such communities to some form of violence.

Newspapers in South Africa

During apartheid, mainstream news media were under the control of the racist State and tended to either support or remain complicit with the ruling National Party

government (Jacobs, 2019). Indeed, the national broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), effectively served as the propaganda arm of State (Sparks, 2009). In her study, Posel (1990) documents how, during this time, images in the media of anti-apartheid protests were typically captured from very close angles, and were often accompanied by inflammatory newsprint such as “security forces were forced to make use of rifles and shotguns to disperse rioting crowds” (p. 162). She notes how black protesters were repeatedly depicted as savage, tribal, unreasonable, and as comprising a monolithically chaotic crowd. These depictions were then referentially drawn on to construct a public discourse of a civil and reasonable police force. Jacobs (2019) similarly highlights how, during apartheid, the SABC would demonize anti-apartheid protesters by describing them as “terrorists,” “Russian-trained,” and/or “agitators.” The news production process was just as oppressive, with apartheid newsrooms subject to inhumane labor practices, such as sjambokking¹ black workers (Braude, 1999, as cited in Durrheim, Quayle, Whitehead, & Kriel, 2005). Nonetheless, although anti-apartheid media were subject to government censorship, exile and shutdown, there was always considerable resistance to mainstream racist media practices, all of which ranged in their political affiliations (Jacobs, 2019).

In the post-apartheid era, the SABC was transformed from a State broadcaster to a public one, and a number of private broadcasters were now permitted, further entrenching an unrestricted and unregulated media landscape. There remained, however, a degree of State regulation, as evidenced by the Films and Publications Amendment Bill of 2019; the strong central editorship control of the SABC that was assumed in 2006; the reliance of the SABC on corporate advertising; and the regulatory standards imposed by semi-autonomous bodies (Sparks, 2009; Tomaselli & Nothling, 2008). Much resistance press that had received donor funding for their anti-apartheid politics have since had this financial support withdrawn, which meant that media opportunities for those living in poor and working-class communities in South Africa (i.e., the majority of the country) became greatly diminished (Pillay, 2003). All of this has meant that in the “New South Africa” a large segment of the oppositional press has folded (Sparks, 2009). The contemporary South African media landscape—while freer than ever before—faces similar constraints to that of global media, meaning that those struggling for free and just reporting face a particular set of institutional and structural barriers.

¹ This entails repeatedly hitting someone with a heavy leather whip known as a sjambok. The sjambok has become symbolic of apartheid-style oppression.

The Present Study

Aims and Objectives

The present study aims to understand how newspapers draw on notions of community to construct Thembelihle, and—from this—draw out insights for critical community psychologists who are concerned with the workings of dominant power and the building of counterhegemonies.

Conceptual Framing

In this study, we sought to engage critical media theory through Martín-Baró’s (1994) psychosocial reading of ideology and power (see also Fisher et al., 2007), thus bringing media studies into conversation with liberatory community psychology. Martín-Baró (1994) argues that power is relational and material, that is, it exists between people and is determined by the resources to which people have access. Dominant power is, however, most effective when it is exercised through coercion. Accordingly, in an effort to render elite social interests commonsensical, oppressive ideologies tend to root themselves in dominant discourse (Van Dijk, 2006). It is in this sense that we can begin to understand the ideological function of newsworthiness and news values (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). Through newspapers, primary definers (i.e., those who have access to resources and, therefore, power) can wield discourse to assert their ideological interests by legitimizing some communities and devaluing others (Rappaport, 1995). Similarly, the dominant discourses wielded by newspapers can work to deny the agency of low-income communities by characterizing these communities by little more than violence and vulnerability, which can affect how community psychologists and others engage with these communities (see Dutta, 2018). Herman and Chomsky’s (2010) Propaganda Model allows us to probe into the ideological purposes of newspaper discourses, and to explore how these discourses interact with broader power systems. In bringing community psychology into dialogue with media studies in these ways, we are afforded insight into why news media tend to engage community issues within particular ideological limits (Fisher et al., 2007). Community-driven counterhegemonic projects may then draw from these insights for their own politically insurgent purposes.

Context

Established in the mid-1980s, Thembelihle is a low-income settlement located in the south-west of Johannesburg. The most up-to-date census data indicate that Thembelihle’s population exceeds well over 21,000

people, and consists of 9000 households, most of which are shack dwellings (Statistics South Africa, 2011). Although located in Gauteng, South Africa's wealthiest province, Thembelihle presents high rates of crime and unemployment (Huchzermeyer, 2009). The community remains only partially serviced and regularized, meaning that large swaths of its population do not have access to electricity, water, or proper sanitation (SERI, 2014).

Over the years, there has been considerable political activism in Thembelihle concerning the issue of dolomite. The South African government claims that Thembelihle's location on dolomitic lands makes *in situ* development impossible. As a result, there have been a number of highly contested State-sanctioned relocations from Thembelihle to the neighboring communities of Lehale and Vlakfontein. Many community activists have, however, contested claims that dolomite renders development in Thembelihle impossible. They contend that the State uses dolomite as an excuse to avoid undertaking expensive development procedures in Thembelihle (Tselapedi & Dugard, 2013). It may be said that the failure to institute material justice, psychosocial well-being, and dignity for the people of Thembelihle reflects South Africa's deeply shameful and inadequate reckoning with its violent history (Suffla et al., 2020).

For over three decades, residents of Thembelihle have collaborated with researchers and community workers from the Institute of Social and Health Sciences, the institution with which we are affiliated. Thus, it was because of our history with Thembelihle that it was selected as a site of study. Yet, Thembelihle also speaks to the larger South African context in particular ways. As noted elsewhere, although "no community is homogenous or archetypical of the South African experience, the historical trajectory of Thembelihle, as well as the meta-narratives that have come to be associated with this community are, in many ways, shared by the majority of South Africans" (Suffla et al., 2020, p. 350). The present study forms part of a larger community-engagement initiative and doctoral research project that sought to work with residents of Thembelihle to construct counterhegemonic action through participatory methodologies (see Malherbe, 2020). Accordingly, the results of the present study were drawn on within these community-led counterhegemonies.

Data Collection and Corpus

The inclusion criterion for this study was any newspaper article that made mention to Thembelihle, including articles where the community was not the central focus. Excluded were reports on the Thembelihle municipality located in South Africa's Northern Cape province, as well as reports that were written by journalists named

Thembelihle (unless, of course, they were reporting on the community in question). While no specific time period was selected, articles ranged between the years 1995 and 2018. Print newspaper articles were sourced via NewsBank's *South African News Media Archives*, which is the largest and most comprehensive collection of news stories in Africa. While the entire server was searched, newspapers which reported on Thembelihle included *The Sowetan*, *Pretoria News*, *Citizen*, *Mail & Guardian*, *City Press*, *Business Day*, *Star*, *Financial Mail*, *Sunday Times*, *Saturday Star*, *This Day*, *The Times*, *The New Age*, *Sunday Independent*, *Daily Dispatch*, *Daily Sun* and *The Witness*. The online platform associated with each of these publications was then also searched. Other news websites that were included in this study were *IOL*, *Daily Maverick*, *ENCA*, *News24*, *Eyewitness News*, and *SABC News*. In cases where the same article was published online and in print, only one was considered for inclusion in the study's data set. All of the newspapers considered were nationally syndicated. Local newspapers, which have a much lower circulation than national papers and are not as comprehensively archived, were not considered in this study. In total, 123 printed articles and 254 online articles were examined.

Data Analysis

Discourses are systems of symbols that create objects or constructs, such as "community" (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). They are part of a fluid set of practices which arrange social life as well as an individual's inner-world (Parker, 2002). For the purposes of this study, discursive psychology offered a particularly useful approach to discourse analysis (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discursive psychology relies upon discursive techniques to analyze how language is used and applies these analyses to particular social contexts (Potter & Hepburn, 2007). Discursive psychology is principally concerned with identifying "interpretive repertoires" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Organized around a number of metaphors, interpretive repertoires can be understood as "mini discourses." They are usually stylistically and grammatically coherent, and tend to develop and adapt to historical circumstances (Rose, 2001). Interpretive repertoires are, in this sense, toolkits that are drawn on in the discursive construction of a seemingly stable reality (Potter & Hepburn, 2007; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Analysts are to look at how interpretive repertoires are utilized to perform particular social actions within certain contexts (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). Thus, an individualizing mode of analysis is substituted for a systems-focused hermeneutic that is sensitive to the psycho-material constitution and consequences of language.

Table 1 Coding categories

Category name	Category description	Frequency
Thembelihle as Violent	Thembelihle labeled violent	202
Police Violence	Violence enacted by police officers	87
Protest	Thembelihle residents protesting	191
Municipality	Interaction between residents of Thembelihle and governing municipality	78
March	Residents of Thembelihle marching against a social issue	24
Dolomite Service	Dolomitic rock in Thembelihle	52
Delivery	Service delivery issues in Thembelihle	184
Relocation	The relocation of Thembelihle residents to other areas	56
Specific Political Party	A political party's engagement with Thembelihle	71
Housing	Housing Issues in Thembelihle	88
Racial Tensions	Race-based conflict in Thembelihle	27
Arrests	Residents of Thembelihle being, or who have been, arrested	97
Shack Fires	Shack dwellings in Thembelihle that have caught fire	10

Relying on Potter and Wetherell's (1987) stages of discourse analysis, this study's analytical procedure adhered to the following steps: coding, main analysis, and validation. During the first coding stage, we condensed the data corpus into smaller fragments (i.e., all newspaper reports which mentioned Thembelihle, either directly or implicitly). We then underlined and designated a particular code to relevant words or phrases (e.g., in the sentence "protesters from Thembelihle burnt down a power station," a number of simple concrete codes were identified, such as: "Burning," "Property Damage," and "Protest"). At the end of this process, almost 150 codes were identified. We then organized each of these codes into 13 coding categories (see Table 1). From these coding categories, we established two discourses (*Signifying Legitimacy* and *Containing the Protest Community*), under which each coding category was classified. In some cases, the same coding category fell under both discourses. The coding process was initially undertaken by this article's first author, after which the second and third authors were consulted. The three of us then met to discuss each coding category and its associated discourse. While there was not significant disagreement here, in cases where there was interpretive incongruence, we sought input from colleagues who were familiar with this project. All decision-making was, ultimately, democratic.

We then proceeded to undertake the main analysis, which included identifying interpretive repertoires that pertained to Thembelihle and its residents; analyzing their variability, political purpose, and consistency; and questioning our reading of these data. During this stage, we continually consulted relevant literature as well as the discursive action model and techniques of fact construction discussed by Edwards and Potter (1992). The final stage, validation, relies on two techniques, the first of which, coherence, speaks to the analysts' understanding of interpretive repertoires and how they relate to broader discourses. If we felt that a news article was unclear, it was disregarded from the analysis. The second technique in the validation process, fruitfulness, refers to the value of a text with respect to the analysts' ability to produce a pertinent interpretation of it, and thus relates to issues of validity. This was apparent within about a third of our initial findings, most of which were either discarded or integrated into the rest of the analysis. As with the coding process, the main analysis was initially undertaken by this article's first author. This analysis was then synthesized with the second and third authors' respective interpretations of the data. Following this and over a series of meetings, the three of us sought to arrive democratically at an analytical synthesis.

The manner by which we engage in knowledge production is always embedded within a particular context and the community relations therein. Thus, the analysis undertaken in this study was undoubtedly influenced by the relationships that we have built with many residents of Thembelihle. In the case of this article's second author, this relationship has been built over three decades. Our engagement with various individuals and community-based organizations during social and political turbulence has enabled us to offer solidarity and support to pertinent community struggles. Throughout these partnerships, we have worked with community members to construct spaces for contestation, thus enabling a critical modality of community engagement. It would seem then that to reduce this community encounter to an insider-outsider interactional binary would be inadequate. As argued by Suffla, Seedat, and Bawa (2015), such a binary oversimplifies the dialectical, hybrid, fluid, and relative nature of long-term community-researcher partnerships. This is not to negate the unequal power relations that define these partnerships. Our institutional affiliations certainly afford us greater resources, and therefore power, than the majority of people living in Thembelihle (see Martín-Baró, 1994). Yet, because of power's relational nature (Fisher et al., 2007), we have sought to make each research endeavor accountable to the residents of Thembelihle, who ultimately decide on community access and how research projects are able to contribute to community life.

Perhaps, then, instead of focusing on “researcher biases,” it is more useful to emphasize how our partnership with Thembelihle—which is always marked by the ebbs and flows of power—shapes the knowledge-making enterprise in fundamental ways.

Discursively Making Community in Newspaper Articles

In reading almost 400 newspaper articles on Thembelihle, it quickly becomes apparent that the community is most often represented through a discursive prism of violence. This is to say that the community is continually interpreted with reference to violence, and thus develops discursively in public consciousness through an association with violence. In other words, violence (which is often vaguely defined in news reports, if indeed it is defined at all) is rendered a constituent feature of the very character of Thembelihle. Thembelihle thus emerged across the different coding categories not only as imminently and relationally violent, but as fundamentally responsible for this violence.

Signifying Legitimacy

Legitimization refers to the degree to which a particular social behavior, practice, or process is accredited or licensed, and thus depends on the support and/or approval of others (Reyes, 2011). In this study, legitimacy served as a significant framing device in many of the news articles across the coding categories, particularly “Protest.” Indeed, any insurgent activity attributed to Thembelihle (the very reason the community is rendered newsworthy) was usually constructed, either explicitly or implicitly, as legitimate or illegitimate. In this way, newsreaders were led to evaluate the legitimacy of the violence in question, as well the social order in which it is situated, with systemic violence which was, itself, almost always established in a given news article as natural or inevitable, and therefore more legitimate than any kind of resistance or reaction to this kind of violence from the community. In this way, the corporate interests embodied in the Ownership and Advertising filters were appeased.

In a newspaper article printed in the *Citizen*, which ran the headline “Squatter anger erupts” (Mabuza, 2002), protesters from Thembelihle (whose spelling is inconsistent throughout the article, perhaps indicating the partial ontology afforded to the community) are characterized as a “mob” on a “rampage.” Although inflammatory, emotive language of this kind works to delegitimize the struggles of protesters, such delegitimization is also achieved in a more subtle manner. Falling within a number of coding

categories (see Table 1), the article describes how residents (who represent a single and coherent voice in the article) “claim” that because there “is no proper sanitation or electricity” their relocation is unjust. This “claim” is then contrasted with the State’s reasoning for relocation, which is described as necessary “because” of the danger of dolomitic sinkholes in Thembelihle. Where the word “claim” attributes to the community a subjective stance (which builds onto the emotive and irrational connotations that are established via the emotive language used to describe the community), State action—through the more direct, and causal subordinating conjunction “because”—becomes marked by a position of objectivity and rationality, and therefore also legitimacy. As is typical in dominant discourse, the Fear filter is drawn upon and community rage is delegitimized so that an oppressive social order can be sustained (see Canham, 2018). Community residents are constructed as having been presented with a legitimate means through which to combat their structurally violent circumstances, yet this is refused on the grounds of their subjective assessment rather than any definitive reality, the latter of which is conferred to the perspective of the State and its actions. It is, therefore, a combination of allocating legitimacy to the State position, illegitimacy to that of the community, and discursive space to emotive descriptions of protester actions—rather than reasons for these actions—that the article brings readers into contact with Thembelihle as a singularly constituted, irrational and baselessly violent entity (i.e., the “Thembelihle as Violent” coding category). Such Statist reporting, it would seem, engaged the Flak filter only insofar as it related to elite ideology.

In another article, published in *Daily Maverick* (De Wet, 2011a), a journalist working in Thembelihle offers readers five “lessons” that the South African public can glean from Thembelihle’s political history, one of which is “[e]motion trumps logic every time.” The apparent lesson here appears to be that “logical arguments” advocated by a “spread of politicians and would be local leaders” which seek to “calm down” protesters are ignored by the overall population of Thembelihle, evidenced by its taking “to the streets” to protest. This “lesson” concludes by noting that “[t]here simply is no selling logic to people once they are well and truly riled up.” Legitimate struggle, in this discursive rendering, can only be ascribed and reasonably dictated from above, meaning that democratic insurgency can only ever surface in the discourse as illogical, illegitimate, and emotional; the consequence of being “riled up.” Thus, those who defy primary definitions by operating outside of the discursive logic set by these definitions cannot be considered legitimate. Together, the five “lessons” (respectively: “Contagion is inevitable, no third force required”; “When you’re angry at the government, your neighbors are in the line of fire”;

“Emotion trumps logic every time”; “Don’t mistake a hand up for a handout”; and “Listening is never a bad idea”) appear to convey a kind of paternalism, where only a reasonable outsider is able to plausibly constitute struggle for the illegitimate community. In turn, the reader “learns” that social order can be restored only through the community’s entering into a (perhaps slightly reformed) liberal politics of respectability (a politics which certainly conforms to the Ownership and Advertising filters), rather than through collective struggle. Community rage and emotion are, once again, cast aside, and readers are encouraged to identify to a greater degree with the article’s detached and dispassionate analysis than they are with the community’s grassroots activist efforts (see Hall, 1987). Accordingly, there is a decreased likelihood of Flak.

This discursive dichotomy, where clear-eyed and legitimate State rationality comes up against an inferiorized and illegitimate community response was by no means anomalous across the news articles. For instance, an article published in *This Day* ran the tagline “Thembelihle residents battle Johannesburg to stay on dolomitic land” (Russouw, 2003). Similarly, a 2011 *City Press* article—titled “Thembelihle wants more”—was taglined “nearby Leahae is serviced but residents won’t go” (Sidimba, 2011), and a 1999 article from *The Star*, which was flippanantly titled “Residents have sinking feeling” (Sepotokele, 1999), claimed that:

despite being warned that the area was at risk because it had been built on dolomite and might sink, some of the residents are opposed to being relocated to Vlakfontein, and say they enjoy and prefer living in Thembelihle [sic].

In each of these three articles—just as in the previous two—residents of Thembelihle, whose multipronged perspectives and contextual realities are only ever considered briefly, if they are considered at all, are constructed as moving outside of the logics proposed by primary definers (and, in turn, the Ownership and Advertising filters), and are therefore constituted within the discourse as illegitimate. Residents are constructed across these articles as desiring to live in an area that has been declared uninhabitable by the State, and therefore their demands and even their viewpoints on this matter need not be seriously engaged. In this way, hardships faced by the community are discursively cast as the product of not following the “reasonable” course of action proposed by an apparently benevolent State.

It would seem that in South African newspaper reporting, Thembelihle is made newsworthy primarily with reference to violence, from which a legitimate-illegitimate binary is established. Through different interpretive repertoires—most of which subscribe to Herman and

Chomsky’s (2010) Propaganda Model—insurgent community action was decontextualized, and made to appear as illegitimate acts of violence. By contrast, State violence is established as legitimate, so long as it coheres with liberalized boundaries of respectability, themselves imposed and defined by the State. Such ahistorical, essentialized and liberalized representations of Thembelihle, and the activist actions of its residents, may then be drawn upon by dominant State powers to justify treatment of the community that aligns with such myopic representations.

Containing the Protest Community

As noted earlier, violence served as a hermeneutic prism through which Thembelihle was discursively established in the different newspaper reports, thus harnessing the Fear filter for ideological purposes. Such violence was rendered newsworthy only when it broke through the existing social order, usually in the form of public protest (i.e., a coupling of the two most common coding categories, “Thembelihle as Violent” and “Protest”). It is significant that “non-violent” protest was only occasionally covered, and when it was, select publications opted to do so (e.g., *The Sowetan*; *Daily Maverick*; *City Press*; *Citizen*). Furthermore, protests understood as violent (with damage to property and police brutality usually collapsed into a singular and vague notion of “violence”) were rarely historicized within news articles. Yet, in every article, the textual positionality of protest (e.g., protest as the article’s principal focus; protest as contextual background for the article’s main focus; or protest as an omnipresent potentiality), as well as the rhetorical function of a particular protest within an article (e.g., protest as an object of critique; protest as an analytical mode; and/or protest as an explanatory consequence) were constructed in very different ways. The continual reference to protest (actual, potential, and imagined) thus establishes Thembelihle in the social imagination as little more than a protest community which must, in almost every instance, be contained through State-directed action if a peaceful social order is to be restored, thereby appealing to both the Ownership and Advertising filters.

In the newspaper articles examined, protest was most often constructed as “service delivery protest” (bringing together the “Protest” and “Service Delivery” coding categories), which—as numerous authors have noted (e.g., Duncan, 2016; Hart, 2008)—serves as a myopic kind of State-centric analysis of public grievances. Indeed, a simplistic, catch-all solution to injustice is offered here through better service delivery, while the overall system of racial and patriarchal capitalism remains intact. Although the adequate rendering of services by the State often forms a central demand of protesters in South

Africa, characterizing every protest as being concerned with an unspecified notion of “service delivery” inadequately speaks to the complex political origins and demands of these protests, which range from social inclusion, to citizenship, to human rights. This myopia is perhaps partly a result of the Sourcing filter that looks only to police for reports on protest (Duncan, 2016). Looking to a 2015 online article published in *IOL* (Sapa, 2015), protesters from Thembelihle are said to have:

once again blocked the K43 road in Thembelihle... on Monday evening, Johannesburg metro police said ... [m]otorists are advised to use the Golden Highway and Nirvana Drive as alternative routes, as protesters are throwing stones towards passing cars. There has been no injuries or damage confirmed as of yet. It was believed they were protesting over electricity ... Lieutenant Kay Makhubela said police used teargas to disperse the protesters, who were apparently demonstrating over service delivery issues.

In a similar manner to other South African media platforms—such as talk radio—which are informed by neoliberal discursive frameworks (see Day, Cornell, & Malherbe, 2019), the above excerpt positions protest with respect to how it disrupts society (i.e., the flow of road traffic), with the particularities of the protest itself rendered a secondary concern (the article vaguely notes that it is “believed” that the protest is concerned with electricity, presumably illegal electricity connections, but even this is not explicated). It is in this sense that the article might more appropriately be considered a traffic report, with a suitably neutral tone, encouraging motorists to work around this momentary, but typical, nuisance. In this way, any engagement with the inherently political nature of the protest is denied and the Flak filter is, once again, negated. While this article does not participate in false reporting *per se*, it draws on particular interpretive repertoires to arrange “facts” in a manner that prioritizes the social status quo. This is not to say that the article gives credence to elite subjects. Certainly, many workers—especially precarious workers—are invested in the smooth functioning of the neoliberal status quo (Day et al., 2019). Rather, it draws attention to how the community comes into public consciousness when *it*, constructed as a monolithic entity, engages in protest.

Many news reports covered protest in Thembelihle from the perspective of the police—that is, from the discursive position of the State—and therefore assumed an “objective” tone through their proximity to such an authoritative source. A 2011 article, published online in *The Sowetan* (Maliza, 2011), reported that:

[a]n 11-year-old boy was hit in the face by a stray rubber bullet in Thembelihle... in Johannesburg yesterday, after service delivery protests in the area had turned violent. The boy was struck by a rubber bullet as he stood in his parents’ yard and watched as police and residents took each other on. [The child] was left grazed, swollen and bleeding from his left cheek.

In this extract, the image of the child is central to the functioning of the discourse. By stating his full name and age, as well as providing a description of the injury, the child becomes established as emblematic of the consequences of the protesting community. Despite this child being shot by a police officer, the article relies on strategic sequencing, as well as evoking a false equivalence, in order to position the child’s injury as an inevitable product of protest, instead of the result of violent State-directed action. Indeed, it is only after the child’s injury has been described that the reader is informed that “[s]ervice delivery protests in the area had turned violent and police fired rubber bullets at the crowd.” The fact that the child was hit by one of these rubber bullets is never directly stated. Furthermore, by positing the police and protesters as two clashing but—implicitly—equal forces, the article condemns the entire protest without considering the unequal dynamics of power that characterize police–protester interaction. However, the article seems to go even further than this. Violence, functioning as an empty signifier, is established as that which brought about the rubber bullets. There seems to be an implication here that had these protests not “turned violent,” or occurred at all, harm to the young child would have been prevented. Power in this sense is afforded in greater part to protesters, whose actions are subtly positioned within the discourse as causing the police to shoot the child.

In differing from news reports which ignore or remake the unequal power relations between police and protesters, many news media articles alluded to the necessity of policing the protesting community. In a 2011 *Daily Maverick* article (De Wet, 2011b), it is noted that:

[r]eports of planned marches into Lenasia itself caused minor spikes of panic, talk of evacuating children in the face of imminent looting. Cooler heads (or the police) invariably prevailed, but if the police presence had been any smaller, any less visible, or police had been perceived to not be in control, that may well not have been the case. Themb’elihle itself also requires a firm police hand, to some extent. Everyone, including protesters and their leaders, acknowledge that criminals have used the chaos caused by demonstrations for their

own gain. They target not the armed-and-waiting residents of Lenasia, but the weaker on their own side of the road. Several police officers have expressed worry at what could befall the old and frail and young in Themb'elihle if it should become a true no-go zone for police. Not to mention the effects should the community then take justice into its own hands.

In this extract, protest is established as a danger to children; resulting in “spikes of panic”; a cause of looting; the domain of “criminals” and “chaos”; and praying on “weaker” citizens, including “the old and frail and young.” From this account, it would seem that in every instance protest is as directionless as it is all-encompassing and damaging. This is perhaps the logical conclusion to the protesting community discourse, and it follows that against this apparently baseless destruction “[c]ooler heads (or the police)” are championed as external mediators. As the discourse favors repressive State apparatuses over the community taking “justice into its own hands,” the “Police Violence” coding category becomes self-legitimizing. Yet, with respect to the study of power and how it is justified, what is most pertinent in the case of this article is what it omits. It cannot be claimed that every person living in Thembelihle supports every community protest. However, through decades of activism, protest does form an important part of the community’s historical trajectory, and therefore also its identity. Certainly, protest has been responsible for a number of victories, such as the partial electrification of Thembelihle in 2016 (see Phala, 2016), meaning that in all likelihood protest is a source of pride for many in the community. The article neglects to consider this. Additionally, by relying on constructions that evoke three contesting and monolithically rendered entities: “the community,” “protesters,” and “police,” the article does not engage the reasons that community members may be sceptical of the police, the overall goals of the protest in question, and possible factions within this protest. Another peculiar omission in the article relates to the notion of “slow activism” (see Robins, 2014), that is, the tremendous amount of organizing and planning behind protest events. Characterizing such protest as “chaos” discursively places a value judgement onto the consequences of protest, while ignoring the bureaucratic and legislative processes that undergird the organization of protests. Discursively placing police-protester interactions within such a simplistic order-chaos binary acts to rationally posit policing protest as requisite in maintaining a social order that, because it is not given any critical discursive attention in the article, emerges as inherently just.

It would seem that discourses around *Containing the Protest Community* seek to construct Thembelihle in two

central ways, both of which cohere with how the community is engaged by dominant powers. Firstly, in harnessing Herman and Chomsky’s (2010) Fear filter, the protest community is established as one that participates in protest in a wholly directionless and violent manner. Violence of this sort is not always defined, and functions as a kind of empty signifier which points to an overall condemnation of protest, rather than attempting any sort of political and systems-focused analysis of protest. A signification spiral can thus be noted here (see Hall et al., 1978), where Thembelihle emerges as a faceless and violent protesting mass (Seedat, 1999). Secondly, if an article does provide motivation for the violence characterizing protest (which, as a means of advancing the “illogic” of the protest community, it often does not), such violence is, in almost every instance, constructed as a response to a lack of “service delivery.” This acts to diminish or oversimplify the political nature of protests and allows newspaper articles to plausibly construct protesters as irrational due to their ambivalence toward the social services which have been rendered (no matter how inadequately) by the State. From this emerges a paternal, even patronizing, discourse around the need for purveyors of ideological State apparatuses (e.g., State-aligned media personnel or the police) to “educate” or “contain” the community. Very little, if any, mention is made to community issues as articulated by community members themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion

In placing critical community psychology in conversation with media studies, the present article seeks to explore how, and for what political purposes, “community” is discursively drawn on in South African newspapers to construct the community of Thembelihle. We identified two discourses, *Signifying Legitimacy* and *Containing the Protest Community*, both of which inform a construction of Thembelihle that is shot through a hermeneutic prism of violence. Resultantly, Thembelihle—an already marginalized community—emerges in public consciousness almost exclusively through references to violence. This, as many critical psychologists of community have argued (e.g., Martín-Baró, 1994; Seedat, 1999), affects not only public opinion and civil society’s response to systemic injustice, but also legislation, policy, and a community’s self-image. It also denies the agency of community members by relying on a “damaged-centered” frame (see Dutta, 2018).

Analyzing primary definitions suggests to critical community psychologists how to reject discourses which confine communities to pain, suffering, and dispossession, and to instead legitimize resistance and struggle through

nuanced, historicized, and community-oriented conceptions of community. In our own work, numerous campaigns, group discussions, and public events have focused on biased media depictions of Thembelihle, and the imperative for counterhegemonic activity and public pedagogical efforts to speak out against these depictions. For instance, in 2017 we collaborated with residents of Thembelihle as well as a film production company to produce a documentary film that sought to speak back to news reports of Thembelihle (Suffla et al., 2020). Situated within a humanistic frame, the documentary captured Thembelihle's multifarious quotidian life, grassroots resistance politics, and histories from the different—sometimes incongruent—perspectives of those living in the community (Malherbe, 2020). At public screening events in and beyond Thembelihle, audiences have used the documentary to organize community-building activities (e.g., demonstrations, solidarity across social movements, cross-community communication, and community campaigns) around nuanced depictions of their community. In this way, the documentary has been used to advance community-led struggles in Thembelihle, while not defining this community by these struggles, as is the case in newspaper reports which rely on a discursive prism of violence. The documentary thus served as a means through which to resist myopic characterizations (e.g., the “protest community”) while noting that insurgent community action should not be assessed in a singular fashion. In speaking back to individualist, State-centric, and ahistorical discourses in this way, we may open up space for collective discursive reconstitution (e.g., re-signifying what is legitimate and what is illegitimate community action) while simultaneously foreclosing oppressive discursive spaces (e.g., debates regarding the responsibility of individuals for their structurally violent circumstances).

Work of this kind is also able to contribute to dismantling constructions of communities as wholly violent and essentially “Other” geo-specific places (a construction that oftentimes operates in tandem with discourses that define communities as violent *because* they are “Other”). This includes considerations around amplifying a multitude of, often contradicting, voices in an effort to create a basis of common community concerns, and working to articulate these concerns to and for audiences within and beyond the community. Thus, if critical community psychologists embrace the inherent incompleteness that characterizes representations of community, our task becomes not to capture the essence of community, but to legitimize its interconnecting struggles through a “radical re-envisioning of epistemic parameters that simultaneously disrupt and offer alternatives to essentialist notions of community” (Dutta, 2018, p. 275). In other words, the impossible—even undesirable—task of representing *the* community

compels critical community psychology praxes to build and enhance significations of community that act against monolithic and dominant constructions which are grounded in empty and Statist conceptions of (il)legitimacy. It would seem then that the manner by which a community is constructed within dominant discourse (if indeed it is mentioned at all) can inform the collaborative work that is undertaken by communities and researchers. In making dominant discourse—and its material consequences—a central feature of such work, we can begin to understand how ideological hegemony accrues its coercive power (i.e., what are the genuine public concerns it speaks to and distorts). We may then draw on these insights when attempting to garner support for socially just counterhegemonic activity.

As noted earlier, this study examined mainstream newspapers and therefore ignored the discourses that were drawn on in locally-circulated newspapers, such as *Lenasia Times* and *The Rising Sun*². This is undoubtedly a weakness of what might be understood as the study's credibility. Indeed, local newspapers certainly influence public opinion in this area. Although the low circulation of community newspapers means that they are less discursively potent than national newspapers, for many people, these publications serve as their primary, if not their only, interaction with Thembelihle. Future research should take greater care to consider such publications which may not be hegemonic.

Critical community psychologists who are working through the profound psychosocial wounds that afflict majority populations living under racial and patriarchal capitalism have a duty to confront the workings of power. Accordingly, while we should be expected to harness existing as well as emerging enactments of counterhegemony, socially just policy, the everyday, and community-oriented legislation, we are also required to examine how the discursive workings of dominant powers relate to people's material realities. In this study, we argue that newspapers are ideal in this respect as they can lay the foundations for how to proceed in changing dominant discursive terrains; providing insights into how communities are perceived, engaged, and handled; and informing, as well as aggrandizing, efforts to build flourishing and safe communities whose residents' psychosocial anguish, quotidian lives, and sense of belonging are taken seriously by a democratically constituted set of institutions.

² While such regional newspapers do not necessarily have the interests of low-income communities in mind, their engagement with local realities can allow for more nuanced reporting than the better-funded national newspapers. For instance, both of the newspapers that we mention here have covered the Lenasia area for decades, which likely imbues their reporting with a greater sense of historicity.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest that they wish to declare.

Ethical Approval

The authors of this manuscript have complied with APA ethical principles in their treatment of individuals participating in the research, program, or policy described in the manuscript. The research has been approved by the University of South Africa's Institute for Social and Health Sciences. The study received no funding. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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