Deficit thinking in South Africa's water allocation reform discourses: a cultural discourse perspective

Beatrice Dube

Development Studies, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

The article focuses on how deficit thinking emerges from the statements made by some of the participants of a study on water allocation reform in South Africa. It draws from interviews and focus group discussions from a select few participants of the qualitative study. The application of the deconstructive strategy to analyse data reveal perceptions of deficiencies in the capacities of black people in agriculture as well as in government offices. The study found that expressions of concern regarding threats on the environment when and if water is allocated to black communities are based on assumptions of inherent deficiencies within the black communities. This article characterises this perception as 'deficit thinking'. The article provides the basis for such characterisation by explaining the origins and meaning of the concept of deficit thinking. It argues for the need to consider the impact of social forces such as apartheid discriminatory practices on the socio-economic constitution of the black person. The article concludes that deficit thinking needs to be confronted as a challenge trumping water reform. It warns of the implicitness and covertness of deficit thinking and recommends that discourses reflect the realities of post-1994 South Africa which emerged from colonial and apartheid rule.

Key words: cultural discourse studies, deficit thinking, historically disadvantaged individuals, ubuntu, water allocation reform, South Africa

Introduction

Current literature on challenges faced in the implementation of water allocation reform in South Africa has stressed on technical aspects of the licensing system, the tedious administrative processes and fragmentation of the relevant departments. These identified challenges are all structural, which masks other, less identifiable, obstacles to reform such as deficit thinking. The article focuses on how deficit thinking emerges from the statements made by some of the participants of a study on water allocation reform in South Africa. Deficit thinking blames victims of structural inequalities and thrives on racial stereotypes.

The history of South African water allocation is rooted in a system of laws and policies which favoured the minority white people while disadvantaging the majority black people (see Tewari 2002). The arrival of settler colonialists in 1652 reshaped the history of the land that would become known as South Africa in ways that now defines the country as the most unequal countries in the world (World Bank Group 2018). Through a series of legislations, black people were dispossessed of their land and all resources associated with it (cf. Sihlongonyane 2005). The South African National Water Act (NWA), (No. 36 of 1998) has been viewed as having heralded a new era in terms of South African water governance. Key in its purpose was the need to bring about redress to water governance from past constellations. The purpose of the 1998 Water Act as stated in clauses 2 (b) and (c) is to promote equitable access to water as well as to redress the results of past racial and gender discrimination (RSA 1998). As part of legislative reform, the Water Allocation Reform (WAR) was rolled out in 2001 to redress past water allocation imbalances through the promotion of equitable access of water for all (see DWAF 2005, 2008; Seetal 2006). Water allocation reform can also be understood broadly as a process whereby significant elements of an allocation regime are reviewed with changes being made to policies, laws, and mechanisms that have a significant impact on allocation arrangements (OECD 2015: 93). The reform objective entailed the redistribution of access to water to ensure that 60% of water access was transferred to black people by 2024 (DWAF, 2008). However, the Department of Water Affairs reported that transformation programmes were failing as the control and allocation of water resources had remained unchanged (DWA, 2014).

Several reasons have been advanced as key to the limitations of water allocation reform. These include legislation(s) on allocation of water, transformation of institutions to deal with

allocation and access of water, framing of discourses on water such as water scarcity discourses and skewed ownership of land (see Dube 2020: 190). It has also been noted that reform processes may not have been well received by existing users (cf. Peters and Woodhouse 2019: 7) as they had gotten used to a system where 'water supply was assured, black demand was in check, international obligations were lax, environmentalism was low key (Brown 2013: 274) and their private control over water was unthreatened. The greater part of the last two decades has, therefore, seen South Africa embark on a journey to redress past discriminatory practices with very little success. Of concern has been in-built constraints to redress found in land clauses in the Constitution (cf. Andrew 2007: 140; Movik 2009: 4; Ntsebeza 2007), the reallocation embargos in favour of already existing water users contained in clauses in the NWA (cf. DWAF 2005) and the dominance of environmental and scarcity discourses in the NWA (see Movik 2012). Twenty-two years after the promulgation of the NWA and nineteen years after the rolling out of the WAR, water resources remain unfairly allocated with 95% of agricultural water use being in the control of white commercial farmers (DWS 2018: 11; Movik 2009).

The article builds on the fieldwork and findings of my doctoral study carried out between 2017 and 2019. The study sought to investigate the deliberateness of a water infrastructure project to allocate water to historically disadvantaged individuals as part of redress. While the study's findings concur with literature on the constraints found in the implementation of the Water Allocation Reform strategy, it emerged from the study that there are perceptions of deficiencies associated with black people as active and productive water users as well as competent government officials. The study identified such perceptions within the context that they were expressed as deficit thinking. This finding forms the basis of this paper. This article proposes that deficit thinking be considered as one of the constraints confronting the re-allocation of water resources. The article provides the basis for the proposal by explaining the origins of the concept of deficit thinking in the education milieu and how the same manifests itself in the water sector.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section unpacks the theoretical framework then moves to the methodology which covers the qualitative approach then a brief review of cultural discourse studies and the local cultural values that informs the analysis. The second section provides a review of literature on deficit thinking, the resource access history of black South Africans and the narratives within which this access has been framed. The section also provides

brief literature on justice in post-colonial states. The third section discusses study results and is followed by a discussion section. The fifth section concludes the paper.

Theoretical underpinnings: Distributive justice

The theory of distributive justice was used to re-conceptualise some of the discourses and principles of water allocation reform in South Africa. South Africa is a highly unequal country with one of the highest Gini coefficient in the world (Wilson 2011) and distribution of resources has been aligned to that unequal structure (Gumede 2014; 2016; Knight 2014). Rawls'(1971) theory of justice, particularly the difference principle advocates for an egalitarian way of distributing resources. Veatch (1991) has described egalitarianism as a justice system whereby allocation practices involve giving everyone an opportunity for equality of well-being. Hoffman (2003: 21) called it a philosophy where resource distribution is done so as to maximise the welfare of the worst-off as opposed to utilitarianism where the total benefit is the issue of concern, 'independent of the welfare of individuals.' Neal (Patrick), Greco, Connell and Conrad (2016) expressed that the theory provides a platform where 'decisions can be made based on which alternatives offer the most help for the worst off or that the worst possible outcome is made as good as it can be'. WAR as a reform strategy is meant to redress inequities in ways that ensure that the circumstances of the historically disadvantaged who are mostly black are improved. Rawls' difference principle gives 'absolute priority to the prospects of the least advantaged' (Brighouse and Swift 2008: 4).

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach and the critical social theory as the research paradigm. The critical social theory paradigm is explained by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017: 35) as being situated in issues such as social justice and intends on addressing the 'political, social and economic issues, which lead to social oppression, conflict, struggle, and power structures at whatever levels these might occur'. According to Ngwenyama and Lee (1997), critical social theorists do not merely observe social situations with the objective of giving a sound explanation

to it or understanding it. Their role goes beyond that of observer and extends "to a critique of unjust and inequitable conditions of the situation from which people require emancipation' (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997: 151; cf. Meissner 2016: 2).

The study used an assortment of qualitative data collection methods. Analysed data are based on only the unstructured interviews with male non-black policy experts, black female academics and focus group discussions with a mixed-gender group of black small-scale farmers and domestic water users of varying age groups. The focus of the interviews and focus group discussions was to understand participants' views on justice in the allocation of water in post-1994 South Africa; their understanding of benefits of water use as a principle of equitable water access and the impact of the colonial and apartheid legacies on the implementation of the WAR strategy.

The study from which the paper is derived from had a total of 73 participants. Included in this paper are only the participants whose views are related to the theme of deficit thinking, which only emerged as a finding in the study. Since deficit thinking was not the primary objective of the study, participants had not been chosen for their deficit perspective but for their expertise in the subject of water allocation reform. It is in how they presented their opinions and inputs that deficit thinking was observed to be playing a role. The paper is, therefore, limited to the interpretations that showed deficit thinking by the two policy experts who were active policy influencers at the time of the research. Similar or divergent narratives from existing literature are also referred to in the paper. For ethical reasons, participants will remain anonymous and will only be referred to by the role they played in the study, their race and gender.

Ubuntu philosophy and cultural discourse studies

The study explored a number of water allocation discourses including equality, equity, scarcity and sustainability. The objective was to gain further understanding on meanings and framings of these concepts in order to understand how current legislation and policies are driving the redistribution of water to those historically disadvantaged by past colonial and apartheid governance systems. Informed by the Ubuntu philosophy and its African ways of being and knowing, texts recorded through the qualitative research methods are in this paper analysed using a methodology that is entrenched in cultural discourse. The following is a brief outline of Ubuntu philosophy as well as that of cultural discourse studies and the associated methodological style.

Ubuntu philosophy

Ubuntu or hunhu is a living philosophy of the Bantu people of Southern Africa. According to Letseka (2015: 550) the concept of Ubuntu (or philosophy of Ubuntu as Ramose (1999) calls it) upholds humaneness and "has the capacity to constitute order, to restore peace, and to maintain the balance between conflict and harmony". The philosophy thus upholds the idea that "'*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' (Nguni/Zulu/Ndebele) or '*munhu munhu nevanhu*' (Shona)" (Mangena, 2016) meaning 'a person is a person through other persons'. The English translation of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* however does not do justice to the depth of the Ubuntu philosophy. *Ngabantu* is not limited to just 'other persons' but goes beyond the living to embrace those that have come before us and those that will come after us, the ancestors and the descendants. Consequently, one is sensitive to the needs of others and not just of the self (cf. Asante, 2011; Eliastam, 2015) and recognises the past as informing the present and concerns oneself with not just the present but the future as well. The Confucius philosophy in East-Asia can in part be compared to Ubuntu philosophy as they base a harmonious society on the idea of loving others or '*ren*' (Jianhong 2007; Wang 2009: 328). The Ubuntu and Confucius philosophies both revered harmonious societies and despised personal interests, something that sets the two apart from western individualistic tendencies (cf. Krishnan 2011).

As a philosophy, Ubuntu should not be conceptualised of as a term/concept that can simply be defined or confined to a set of categories (see also Po-keung's (1986; 98) description of Tao). This is why Ramose (1999; 2016) called it a philosophy by which he means something that "arises out of the living conditions of human experience" and is therefore not universal. In its general conception, ubuntu is not different to Christian ethos defined through the ten commandments nor is it different to the idea of respect for others, a moral requirement that exists in many other cultures and religions. Ramose (2016) thus posits that from an ontological perspective, Ubuntu is about "be-ing a being", in other words, to be human. Ramose (2016) adds that "umuntu ought to have ubuntu" or "munhu ought to have hunhu" (a person ought to have humaneness). Furthermore, a person has an obligation to be ethical - if not ethical, then one is not a human being - to be a human being is to be "ubuntu" (Ramose 2016; see also Asante, 2011: 52) and ubuntu demands truth and justice. Ramose (2016) explains that the prefix '*ubu*' or '*hu*' can be conjoined with other suffixes not just '*ntu*' or '*nhu*' to form a word which means the opposite of ubuntu/hunhu. Using the Zulu language as an example, '*ubu*' can be combined with '*isigqila*' to

form '*ubuglila*' which means slavery in English. In communities, which Ramose (2016) explains as 'constructions of relationality', no one, he argues, can claim not to be bothered by truth and justice. This search for justice resonates with Rawls' (1971) theory of justice whose perspective is to do away with categories and conceptualizations of a person beyond their personhood.

Ubuntu goes beyond human-to-human relationships and also embraces human-nature relationships. In his analysis of the human-nature relationship, Chibvongodze (2016: 157) went further to add a third dimension to the Ubuntu human-nature relationship; the spiritual aspect. According to Chibvongodze (2016), the human-nature-spiritual relationship is argued to be the basis for environmental conservation in traditional African societies as also argued by Motsei (2018) that the indigenous African's relationship with land and water "*transcends the physical*". Through several traditions and taboos including having a day of the week set aside for not working the land and use of totems as a means of allocating responsibility to nature (animals and plants) to clans, nature was respected and preserved (see Chibvongodze 2016; Kwashirai 2003). The idea of living in harmony with nature is thus not alien to Africans (cf. Apusigah, 2011). The relationship between Africans and nature was disrupted by colonialism and Kwashirai (2003) argues that Africa's environmental history has now "been dominated by analyses of the colonial experience and its legacies". This experience and legacies do not place the indigenous person as having any knowledge about their environment. To this end, Kwashirai (2003) claims that 'degradation narratives must be treated with great skepticism as they often have served colonial and post-colonial critiques of traditional African land use practices.' Ubuntu has effectively been downtrodden by processes of anthropocentrism that separated the human-nature relationship through extended periods of colonialism and subjugation of African ecologies (Plumwood 2003 in Chibvongodze 2016: 157). Urban spaces in South Africa therefore do not come across as inhabited by people with Ubuntu values due to the degeneration of the environment, yet also, the process of urbanization and the mostly overpopulated environments in which black communities find themselves living in leave little room for imagining a peaceful existence with land and water.

Ubuntu values however remain the foundations of that which denotes an African way of being and knowing. It is also supposed to challenge any threats to harmony such as prejudice which comes with gender, nationality, racial and ethnic differences. Communication based on Ubuntu values thus seeks to maintain social cohesion. Meaning making in academic studies can however

not be assumed to neglect the cultural aspect of the researcher as discourse studies are themselves not "culturally neutral" (Shi-xu 2005: 4; 89; 92). The Ubuntu values together with the socio-political history of South Africa informs the local context from where interpretations of deficit thinking in this paper are derived from.

Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS)

Discourse analysis concerns itself with the analysis of 'textual data in order to gain insights to particular phenomena' based on the view that language is more than just 'a functional, instrumental conduit of information' (Heracleous 2006: 1). Wu (2010) avers that there are two types of discourse analyses; the linguistic based and the culturally or socially based practices. This paper applies the cultural/social discourse analysis which pertains to the context within which discourses are produced (Wu 2010: 130). The latter falls under what Shi-xu (2005; 2014; 2016) describes as Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS). CDS is motivated by the need to dispel the myth that comes with Westcentric approaches to discourse that presents a monolithic world view while denying other cultures their relevance (Shi-xu 2014). It also departs from a text-focused approach taken by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as discourse pertains to more than just language use as it is a "multi-layered, context-dependent and socially constitutive practice of articulation" (Zienkowski 2017: 152). Whereas discourses of the West purport to represent universal truth, CDS allows for a pluralistic approach where culturally conscious scholars and students showcase humanity's cultural diversities, dynamics and divisions (Shi-xu 2005: 34; 2014: 24; Wu 2010).

Of particular importance to this paper is CDS' recognition of community specific communication as influenced by "historical circumstances and intra/intercultural power relations" (Shi-xu 2014: 25). CDS considers the power dynamics that come with discourses as it does not view perspectives on a subject or object as neutral as argued by Wu (2010; 130) that discourse "influences, establishes or transforms context". Certain narratives are a result of or are influenced by previous talks about the subject/object. Thus Shi-xu (2005: 21) posits that the way ballet or architecture are received is because of the way they are "talked of and written about in society". Similarly, the issues surrounding water access problems in a former apartheid homeland, are talked of differently to similar problems in a city that is predominantly white in its racial demographics. Such was the case with the reporting of day zero (when water access could collapse due to drought) issues in Dididi Village in the Vembe District and the city of Cape Town, both in South Africa. Of

particular interest in this case is the description of how Cape Town's "resilience" is "celebrated" (see Pumps Africa, 2020) when multiple actors were involved in solving the crisis, including nationwide calls for water donations. The narrative is however different for the Vembe District where "distraught" villagers such as those in Dididi Village had no assistance at all and share water sources with animals yet they are a walking distance from a full dam (Phakgadi, 2018). What these two articles therefore do is construct a narrative, in line with preceding discourses where there is always victory for the white, and hopelessness for the black communities. Such narratives have the power to mediate how issues develop and are defined.

CDS concerns itself with specific not general topics. Shi-xu (2005) listed some of the topics dealt with in this type of analysis as 'domination, exclusion, rebuilding or transformation'. The study of water allocation reform in South Africa concerned itself with the domination of the minority whites in access to the country's scarce resources; exclusion of the majority black communities from access to both productive and domestic water as well as the transformation of the water sector landscape in terms of legislations, processes and institutions as part of redress of colonial and apartheid discriminatory practices. The subject of analysis for this paper thus fits within the topic of cultural imperialism, explained by Duncan (2007 citing Young 1992) as an experience where one exists "in a society whose dominant meanings render the particular perspectives and point of view of one's group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as 'other'". Although often 'implicit and covert', discourses of cultural imperialism can be identified when tension arises due to racial, gender, nationality and ethnic differences (Shi-xu 2005).

Owing to the subject of focus of the study, the deconstructive strategy is the most appropriate method to analyse discourses of cultural imperialism. The deconstructive strategy is explained by Shi-xu (2005: 91) as being aimed at identifying, highlighting, confronting and alleviating "the problems of cultural prejudice, discrimination or domination" produced through discourse. Through the deconstructive process, a researcher can discern imperialist ideological discourses which seek to "demean, dominate and discriminate against other groups and communities on the basis of 'race'" (Shi-xu 2005: 95). The process of deconstruction of the deficit ideas in this paper takes the form of identifying the deficit ideas in order to expose the thinking

they push forward, challenge them by offering alternative views on the subject and placing the discourse within the context which should form the basis for their understanding.

The combination of critical social theory and cultural discourse studies in this study provided a lens through which meaning was inferred from the texts. The apparent reluctance to redistribute resources in South Africa based on colonial and post-colonial critiques of the black African provides a context within which meaning is constructed. Analysis of discourse in this paper thus focuses on the voices and understanding of the subaltern groups, privileging the Ubuntu philosophy and its cultural characteristics to inform how the texts are interpreted.

Literature review

In this section, literature on deficit thinking is discussed. This is followed by a discussion of pre-1994 agriculture in South Africa to give the context within which water allocation reform has to take place. The focus lastly turns to reallocation of resources in 'post-colonial/post-apartheid' nations. The discussion takes the justice perspectives where consideration has to be given to the worse off and thus there is bias towards the historically disadvantaged.

Overview of deficit thinking in the schooling system

Much of the available literature on deficit thinking is based on studies in the education milieu (cf. Davis and Museus 2019:121). The term deficit thinking itself was developed in the 1900s as an endogenous theory to explain the reasons why students of colour or racial minorities in America performed poorly or failed in school (Valencia 1997). The theory suggests that school failure has to do with 'internal deficits or deficiencies' of the failing students (Valencia 1997). Valencia (1997: 2) listed some of these alleged deficits as 'limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behaviour'. These deficits are also said to be linked to genetics, culture, class and familial socialisation (ibid) and are 'inherent in disenfranchised individuals and communities' (Gorski 2010: 4). Ford and Grantham (2003: 217) also add that '[D]eficit thinking exists when educators hold negative, stereotypic, and counterproductive views about culturally diverse students and lower their expectations of these students accordingly'. The same idea is echoed by Dudley-Marling (2015: 1) who sees deficit thinking in the assumptions that school or workplace failure is a reflection on the person's 'lack of ability and/or effort'. Although there has been opposition to such kinds of thinking on the basis that they are products of unsound assumptions (see Valencia 2010) and that such thinking

supported 'colonial economic interests' (see Menchaca 1997), deficit thinking continues to be supported by others. For instance, pro-Darwinists with a 'functionalist view of …society' (Olivos 2006: 46) shift any form of failure to individuals and not structures and institutions that set laws and policies that define who and how opportunities are accessed.

The use of perceptions to define and explain other cultures or races can have detrimental effects on the defined and explained races and cultures. This is especially significant in cases where the perceptions, be they positive or negative 'influence the development of definitions, policies and practices' (Ford and Grantham 2003: 218). Literature on deficit thinking has shown that in America for instance, there are perceptions about minority students' and their school failures which deficit thinkers associate with students' home cultures, languages and their intelligent quotient (IQ) (see Ford and Grantham 2003; Valencia 1997). In their study of the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programmes, Ford and Grantham (2003) noted how deficit thinking influenced how 'giftedness' was defined and how assessment instruments applied were inequitable considering the diversity of the students. Sayani (2014) argued that deficit theorisers do not see beyond deficiencies they perceive in the students in order to determine other possible reasons for their failure such as educational policies and practice. Even though much literature on deficit thinking is from America, similar trends can indeed be observed especially in countries where white culture is presumed to be the dominant culture.

Although deficit thinking seems almost abstract as it explains how some perceive others, it has identifiable characteristics as discussed by Valencia (1997) and known categories (see Olivos 2006). It is beyond the scope of this article to explain each of the characteristics other than the ones that apply to observations from the water allocation reform study (which will be explained in the discussion). Valencia (1997: 3), however, mentioned six characteristics, namely: 'blaming the victim, oppression, pseudoscience, temporal changes, educability and heterodoxy'. Olivos (2006: 46-47) discusses three categories of the deficit theories namely: the biological, the structural or environmental and the cultural deficits. The biological deficit theory is explained by Olivos (2006: 46) as the classical racist theory which views other races as genetically inferior and this has been applied to non-whites. This links with Ford and Grantham's (2003) discussion on IQ. Structural inequalities are also observed by deficit theorisers but as noted by Olivos (2006), to only result in welfare-based policies. The cultural deficit theory is explained in much the same way deficit theory

has now come to be understood in the education milieu, where non-whites are viewed as lacking ambition, emotionally unstable, having low self-esteem etc. (Olivos 2003: 47).

Past literature on deficit thinking has focused on minorities and the education system in North America. As noted by Valencia (1997), William Ryan's book, *Blaming the Victim*, went further than the education system to cover other social programs. Deficit thinking is also exhibited in the treatment of people of foreign nationalities. African refugees in Sweden for instance, are labelled '*svarting*' (person with a dark complexion), a term considered to be "racially pejorative" and their dark skin is viewed as synonymous with being criminal (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore 2015: 131). Such racial prejudice or stereotypes are regularly applied to migrants the world over. In America, other racial minorities such as Japanese Americans, Indian Americans or Chinese Americans are also often depicted as 'competent but cold' (Cuddy, Fiske and Glick 2007). Deficit thinking thus permeates more than just the education system and as Olivos (2003: 51) pointed out, it may also be perpetuated by non-whites 'who accept the dominant form of thinking as the norm.'

Pre-1994 black agriculture in South Africa

Black South African agriculture suffered gravely as a result of colonialism and apartheid. Chambati, Mazwi and Mberi (2018: 106) describe how 'peasants' suffered as a result of primitive accumulation (driven by monopoly capitalism) which ultimately separated them from their means of production. Having been under the control of the Dutch and the British since settler colonialism, relevance of black agriculture was swept aside as white agriculture became the only legitimate agriculture and black people could only participate as labourers or subsistence farmers on the barren lands they had been banished to. The poor whites on the other hand were on their arrival in now South Africa given land and access to water through the riparian system (see Tewari 2002 for riparian system) and have gained and inherited skills in agriculture as a result. According to Kariuki (2009: 2 in Maphosa 2016: 48), black agriculture in Southern African countries including South Africa was "systematically destroyed through a series of legislative processes…". White agriculture on the other hand was propelled into dominance making white commercial farmers the only key food producers in the country (see Aliber and Hart 2009).

Vast differences exist between commercial and subsistence farming in South Africa and this has been associated with the levels of skills involved; (farming, management, record keeping skills, etc.) (see Khapayi and Celliers 2016; Maphosa 2016). The skills gap in black communities

involved in farming is also noted in the position paper on water allocation reform (DWAF 2005: 3). It is noted in this paper that redress in water allocation was meant to also address capacity of the "historically disadvantaged individuals and the poor to participate equitably in water resource management". As such, water allocation reform needs to be built on an appreciation of the circumstances of historically disadvantaged individuals for whom reform processes are aimed for. The position paper however has in-built constraints to water allocation as it guards against the disruption of access from current users (see DWAF 2005: 1). In spite of the framework presented in the position paper, agricultural practices by black people have remained weakly structured and poorly resourced resulting in poor outcomes.

Justice after colonialism and apartheid

Water allocation reform in South Africa has to be understood within a context where the black majority had limited to no access to water for commercial use for more than 300 years due to dispossession and associated discriminatory laws and policies (see Tewari 2002). Given the enduring nature of colonial injustices, it is important to see how justice is conceptualized for post-colonial/apartheid states. Lu (2011) provides a context for which justice in 'post' colonial states can be conceptualised. Writing in the context of Japanese colonialism of Korea, Lu (2011) suggests that injustices associated with colonialism should be viewed as structural. The author explained that political, social and economic injustices affecting a majority population are not a product of individual or state act but rather that of 'structural processes that enable(d) and even encourage(d) individual or state wrongdoing, and produced and reproduced unjust outcomes' (Lu 2011: 262). There is then need, according to Lu (2011) for structural reform to take place after acknowledging colonial injustices as structural injustices, that is, layered rather than linear whereby the perpetrator is singular (see also Miller, 2007). Reform will then be realised when 'victims of colonial structural injustices achieve the necessary conditions for effective political and social agency within their respective societies' (Miller 2007: 264). This view is shared by Mbeki (1978) in a speech in which he rejected the acceptance of blacks by capitalism only as workers. He thus proposed that:

'free South Africa must … redefine the black producer or rather...we shall redefine our own position as follows:

- we are the producers of wealth;
- we produce this wealth for our own benefit to be appropriated by us the producers;

- the aim of this production shall be the satisfaction, at an increasing level, of the material and spiritual needs of the people' (Mbeki, 1978).

In his discussion of capitalism and agriculture, Gavin Williams also shared the same sentiments as those expressed by Mbeki above. Williams (1990: 142) expressed that:

> Africans widely regard permanent subordination to wage labour as akin to slavery…People want access to land, not out of a petit-bourgeois concern with values of property ownership, but as one way of securing a measure of independence from control by others. They see Land as the condition for Freedom.

The link between land and water is inseparable in defining the dispossession of the African person as well as the means to empower them through ownership of the means of production.

Repealing the old water legislation and replacing it with the National Water Act of 1998 paved way for a transformation that was set to empower all citizens in accessing water. This legislation was considered to be comprehensive (Kemerink, Ahlers and Van der Zaag, 2011). The new legislation was to shift from the focus on only white people to all-inclusive water access. Tempelhoff (2017) has commented on the consistency in South Africa's water legislation observing how the changes in the legislations over time had always represented 'a ground breaking shift in the way the state was governed' (Tempelhoff 2017: 190). In other words, the changes in the legislations serve more to glorify the governing system than to bring the much-desired change. Swatuk (2010: 534) has observed that the African National Congress (ANC) government has impressed upon those with water that their share was not going to be taken away from them to be given to 'the poor and disempowered' and yet the NWA of 1998 was brought into place to address discriminatory tendencies of past legislations. In practice, the ANC government has instead focused on distribution of free basic water using methods such as 'demand management, leak detection, removal of alien plants, to make more water available' (Swatuk 2010: 534). Although Swatuk (2010: 534) describes these methods as having sent 'proper signals to South Africa's upstream and downstream neighbours', they are not comparable to the water infrastructure development embarked on during the colonial and apartheid times which ensured the white community had ample water supplies. With regards to availing water to the poor and disempowered, the ANC government's methods come across as insubstantial considering the size of the population to be served and also in the context of water allocation reform.

Results

Although the study did not set out to analyse data according to the race of the participants, patterns emerged from the data that pointed to differences of perspectives from participants who happened to belong to different racial groups. It emerged that while some participants viewed the challenges with the water allocation reform implementation from a structural perspective, other participants did not consider the socio-political history of South Africa and how discriminatory laws and practices resulted in differential access to resources and opportunities. For instance, one female academic (Academic 1) did not romanticize colonialism and saw it as the reason why the majority black people had no access to land and water. She expressed that:

> *… colonialism stole from black people and gave white colonial families access to land and clean water at the expense of the black families, who were and are still considered as workers for the white bosses.*

The same sentiments are expressed by Wilson (2011) who describes the gross inequalities in South Africa as a result of hundreds of years of black dispossession by whites.

While there was evidence of higher outcome expectations from the WAR programme by the black participants, non-black participants did not express confidence in the participation of black farmers at levels higher than subsistence or small-scale. It was noted that policy researchers also had set perspectives about the role they thought black people could play in the use of productive water and how they would impact the ecosystem if 'permitted' to have access to land and water. This led the researcher to question why consideration was being given to 'cumulative sociohistorical processes' (see Burciaga 2015: 4) by black participants but not by the non-black participants. What this shows is non-black participants constructing reality based on the here and now whereas García (2015: 23) cautions that "reality does not exhaust in these phenomena present, as it also covers phenomena that occurred in the past".

Through the use of deconstructive strategy, a number of perspectives were picked-up. It was noted that there was uneasiness with the allocation of water to black people as they were perceived to know nothing and not be able to learn about sustainable farming methods or

environmental sustainability. It was also found that the slow progress in the reform progress was blamed on the perceived incompetence of black officials working in the Department of Water.

The discussion that follows focuses on selected quotations that reveal the discursive strategies used to resist transformation, restrict opportunities and retain segregatory practices where those without resources work for those who have. As observed by Williams (1990:143), 'Restrictions on access to land and obligations on all adult males to pay taxes were used to get Africans to "come out" to work for wages'. The following discussion on deficit thinking thus aims to disrupt the taken for granted ideas about deficiencies assumed to be inherent to black people. While alternative interpretations may be assigned to the texts below, a combination of the distributive justice lens, Ubuntu values and the socio-political and economic history of South Africa persuades the researcher to view the texts from the point of view of *abantu* or *vanhu*.

Discussion

Some study participants expressed fear that the environment will be threatened when and if water resources are allocated to historically disadvantaged individuals who are mostly black. This view came from the interviews with two policy experts, both of whom are non-black. In the interview with Policy Expert 2, fears about unsustainable land and water use by black communities were expressed. The study respondent expressed that *'One has to be extremely careful if they assume that people will be able to farm scientifically and come right'*. Another respondent, Policy Expert 1, who was recalling an experience with land claims matters also expressed similar fears when he said that, '*the community wanted to be settled on the banks of the Midmar Dam, and I said damn right, and you will be polluting the water that feeds Pietermaritzburg – so we looked for alternative site*'. This contradicts an understanding of umuntu having ubuntu where harmony with nature is the way of knowing of the Bantu people. The interviewee, however, expressed his fears as matter-of-fact that if black people would be settled close to the Midmar Dam, they would pollute the water, a kind of thinking consistent with cultural deficit discourse. There are already white farmers on land that is riparian to this dam. Fears for the environment associated with water allocation reform have in the past been questioned by some scholars who wanted to know why existing pollution was not being interrogated similarly (see Movik 2009). Pollution to aquatic ecosystems has been linked to more than just human settlements, formal or informal as wastewater

treatment works were found to be the major polluter (see Dube, Maphosa, Malan, Fayemiwo et al. 2017). Settlements at the banks of rivers or dams are also not unheard of in South Africa with settlements around the Hartbeespoort Dam in the North-West province being an example. The framing of environmental fears as if pollution can only be associated with black communities is an expression of deficit thinking. Painting potential new water users as a potential threat to sustainable water use while ignoring existing ecological damage works against reform progress as new water users are perceived as not worthy of the access to water. Assuming that in the absence of formal education on sustainability and ecology, people are therefore ignorant downplays the efficacy of indigenous knowledge as imparted through Ubuntu values.

Deficit thinking could also be seen being applied to the potential and interest of black people in farming. Cultural deficit thinking often came out implicitly in the study. In his response to the question on why equity had been chosen instead of equality in the allocation of water under the reform process, Policy Expert 1 had this to say:

> An equity dealt with the benefits of water use – e.g. a white farmer employing 100 people – not everyone wants water to farm – but if one person can create jobs then that person can get water

This framing of equity is similar to one rejected by Mbeki (1978) where black people are accepted by capitalism only if they are employed as workers. It keeps the landless under the control of the landed and continues to define the employer using criteria defined by past discriminatory laws and practices which left black communities without land. A male participant in the FGD however rejected that idea of benefits of water use saying that he had his own piece of land where he could grow crops and thus also needed his own water allocation. He added that he '*would rather continue like that than to get orders from someone else. If you have your land you will also create jobs for the black community*'. Water allocation practices have shown preferences for commercial farmers, the majority of whom are white with large commercial farms. The preference for white commercial farmers has been defended on the basis of higher output by the white sector as compared to the black sector as explained by former Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform, Nkwinti (2010). Nkwinti (2010: 6) however pointed out the reasons for the disparities which he said lay in the differences in 'population pressure on land, uneven distribution of resources (technology and resources) as well as inputs (fertilizers, seeds, extension services)', a

common experience for most black farmers. This view is similar to one proffered by another study participant, a female academic (Academic 2), who explained that;

> *... there are some black farmers who are able to do a bit of some irrigation, but I would guess that anyone who is doing some large-scale irrigation has to be close to some large water source like a dam and that is not common in rural areas. Compared to the white farming areas, the most common infrastructure that they have is a windmill to help pump water from a borehole...That type of basic water infrastructure is not seen in the rural areas, it's still very manual and physical in the rural areas...and water for small scale agriculture depends on rain or people have to fetch the water by hand.*

One of the characteristics of deficit thinking according to Valencia (1997) is educability, which assumes low capacity of someone (people of colour) to be taught. One interviewee, Policy Expert 2, expressed the view that there were people who thought giving land to black people had to be done cautiously as there was need to 'be cognisant of …, the education, the socio-economic profile' of the beneficiaries of the distributive process. According to Adiredja (2019: 409-410) 'deficit thinking predicts the (low) educability of students of color and often results in counterproductive, prescriptive solutions or educational policies (e.g., segregation in schools, remedial classes).' Thus, instead of allocating water to historically disadvantaged individuals, the assumption that they would not be able to use it leads to the prescription of equity as the principle for accessing water. The principle, however, organises communities in a hierarchy in ways that disrupts relationality as it is a power hierarchy where some have, and others don't.

In explaining the reasons why there was no visible transformation in the control of water resources even under the reform processes, Policy Expert 1 voiced biological deficit thinking by implying that government officials were incompetent because of their race and working with them was uncomfortable. He expressed that;

> …they were trying to bring in black staff; it was very uncomfortable working at that stage… There are very few capacitated black officials… black people are invisible if you have incompetence (sic).

These statements reject the known truth about the colonial and apartheid experiences of black people, and stands in the way of reform processes. Affairs relating to water in South Africa have been run by the Department of Water and Sanitation whose existence goes back to the apartheid era. The department is reported by Schreiner (2013: 241) to have been a 'highly technical department, where the technical staff (engineers, scientists, lawyers, etc.) were almost entirely white men'. Employment legislations of the colonial and apartheid regime had also been racially exclusive based on a principle where public sector employment vacancies had to be filled in "exclusively by whites" (Hugo 1989: 229). The shift from the apartheid regime to a democratic dispensation meant a change in the public sector participants resulting in spaces previously dominated by white men (as was the case with the then Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF)) having black men and women brought on board. Schreiner (2013: 241) also noted how because of their apartheid legacy, new comers into the department 'had limited technical training or experience in the water sector'. The black officials' competence, or lack thereof should thus be viewed as a result of their environmental conditioning, something that can be explained using the theory of epigenetics (but is however beyond the scope of this study (see Sullivan 2013)).

The statements by Policy Expert 1 thus fail to acknowledge the structural inequalities as a result of the apartheid education system for black people (see University of the Witwatersrand 2013; Phillips 1999). As indicated by Seroto (1999: 26), the education system in rural South Africa 'was aimed at producing people who were not equipped for the realities of life.' In the absence of an education policy that sought to discriminate against the education of the black person, the argument for discomfort would be legitimate. black people's 'incompetence' cannot after the fact be expressed as if it is inherent in their blackness. With this knowledge, the statement can only serve the purpose of demeaning black people, hence the characterisation as deficit thinking. The way the statements were delivered serves to sideline and maintain non-participation of the 'othered' race. Deficit ideas explain away a lot and Olivos (2003: 48) explains three ways they achieve that, namely:

- finding deficiencies which they use to dismiss 'any social problems in existence' that might contradict the basis for their continued dominance;

- claiming that the so-called deficiencies are biological or cultural in order to legitimize the denial of basic human rights for bicultural groups 'without guilt'; and,

- using their deficit idea of bicultural groups to elevate themselves to maintain their 'economic and social domination and its punitive results'.

Policy Expert 1 went beyond concern over lack of capacity based on limited training. His was an irritated discomfort which equated lack of competitiveness with invisibility. This invisibility is however not considered in the same breath with the many legislations which discriminated black people from working the land unless it is white men's land; get employed, unless it is 'menial and non-permanent employment...with the exception of the Department of Defense…' (Hugo 1989). What the statements communicated is conflict on the intersection of two racial cultures, with one assuming superiority, hence the luxury of the discomfort.

One other characteristic of deficit thinking according to Valencia (1997) is blaming the victim. In this study, blaming the victim was observed from the way one focus group discussion participant insisted that young people are 'lazy'. In a description of black people, 'negroes' as they were termed in the Encyclopedia Britannica (1797: 794), idleness is claimed to be one of their characteristics, a characteristic which has now been passed down through centuries and cultures as fact. The construction of black people as lazy has also been noted by Mtose (2008: 160) who also views the 'images of blackness' as 'products of a racist society'. The author sees the racist images of black people as 'fixed and underpinned in discourses of black failure that positions black people as foolish, bad, dirty, uneducated, corrupt and lazy' (Mtose 2008: 161). The labelling of 'young people as lazy' by an FGD participant (black) shows how ideas by dominant groups about black people as lazy are accepted as normal (cf. Oelofsen 2015: 134) and repeated by victims of deficit thinking. Another study participant, Academic 2, however gave a dynamic thinking explanation to the question on why young people were not too involved in agriculture. She explained that:

> *People ask why young people aren't interested in farming, this is not the precolonial world where people could organize as a village, now people are living individualized lives and agriculture is not an option and with social grants it's much easier to live their lives. The culture in rural areas has changed, people*

cannot be organized the way they used to. Policy makers need to consider these things when they make ... decisions.

As also argued by Adiredja (2019) deficit thinking only considers failures as endogenous. Participation in agriculture in South Africa has to factor in exogenous factors such as discriminatory practices that lasted for more than 300 years. Similar to the issues in school failure discussed by Valencia (1997) and other scholars, in agriculture or productive water uses, factors such as the way commercial agriculture is organised to prevent others from joining in, inequalities in access to land, policies and practices that favour those who already have access such as Existing Lawful Users are held as exculpatory in understanding black people's involvement in commercial let alone productive farming beyond small-scale/small-holder and subsistence farming. The participant in the FGD also explained why he thought some black people struggled to participate in agriculture. He identified misinformation as one of the reasons. He explained that:

Growing up I was told that in KwaNdebele area there are no crops that can be produced. People who moved to KwaNdebele thought that the soil is not fertile enough to grow crops. And our former leaders took that idea seriously and that is the reason why agriculture faded away in the black society. We were told that the only agriculture that we can survive with is growing maize but they didn't mention that besides maize; tomato, onions, peanuts, green pepper we can also survive (sic).

The problem with deficit thinking as Valencia (1997) pointed out is that it can shape national policies such as the water allocation reform. Through what Valencia (1997) calls pseudoscience, deficit explanations are given by those with access to influence policy. Making decisions on behalf of victims of deficit thinking as is the case with the story narrated by one respondent takes agency away from the people who are assumed to not know what they want. For instance, Policy Expert 1 expressed that, '*The communities **were only interested in subsistence**, that kind of stuff, **the few goats and the chickens...not on a big scale** – a lot of their children were moving to the cities, it was only the old folks. It was all about looking at the community dynamics in terms of what they wanted to do in terms of livelihoods.*' The stereotype of black people in South Africa favouring subsistence farming is used to maintain the status quo, that way white commercial farming is not threatened. Interventions made from a deficit thinking position are most likely to help in maintaining a status quo where the advantaged continue to have opportunities to prove

their competence while new comers are closed out. This however begs the question of how justice can be achieved when the historically disadvantaged individuals continue to be written off and those in offices of power see their limitations as rooted in their blackness.

Conclusion

Deficit thinking has been presented as a constraint that requires to be accounted for in water allocation reform in South Africa. While the water sector is the focus in this case, similar deficit thinking traits cannot be ruled out in other sectors especially where colonisation or a class system defined the history of a people. Other countries with a colonial history also need to take heed of the potential influence that deficit thinking can have on reform processes that are aimed at reversing colonial legacies which resulted in inequalities and skewed societal power dynamics. Noting the implicitness and covertness of discourses of cultural imperialism, much effort is required in future studies to pay attention to the framings of reform strategies whose locus of enunciation is often Westcentric and may serve to perpetuate discordance. Culturally conscious efforts are required to reshape reform agendas in ways that do not perpetuate inequalities. Besides the Ubuntu philosophy applied in this paper, a decolonial epistemic approach can also be used to critique reform strategies as it is also known to shift ways of thinking and the geography of reasoning.

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