

Emotion, voice and agency: Exploring the written discourses of some township women in South Africa

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Abstract:

This paper is an analysis of the discourses and attitudes that emerged from a set of daily journals kept by a particular group of township women during a training course for domestic workers in South Africa. The principal aim of the paper is to examine the ways in which the women express emotion, voice, and agency through the act of writing and reflecting on their experiences during the training course. A secondary aim is to uncover those recurrent discourses and attitudes that either empower or disempower these women from becoming effective agents capable of challenging their positions in their families and society. The theoretical and conceptual framework for this study draws on Appraisal Theory and studies on voice, agency and identity.

Introduction

Post-apartheid South Africa is engaged in a number of macro-discourses relating to current and future socio-political developments in the country. However, the micro-discourses of citizens at grassroots level are surely just as important to determine the key issues affecting the lives of ordinary people. This paper uses the Appraisal framework of White (1998, 2000), Martin (1997, 2000), Martin and Rose (2007), and others in an examination of the discourses present in the personal journals of a group of unemployed women from a peripheral Cape Town township. According to White's Appraisal homepage (White, n.d.), the Appraisal framework is 'a particular approach to exploring, describing and explaining the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personas and to manage interpersonal positionings and relationships'.

The women who wrote the journals were selected by a university centre to attend a three-week training course in domestic service in order to provide them with a qualification in this field, which would improve their employment prospects. Every day, they were transported out of their township to the training centre in a major university town approximately 20 km away. In their journals, they reflected on the experience of leaving the township daily to attend the course in a more pleasant environment, leaving behind their situations of poverty and male dominance, in most cases, their hopes for the future and their beliefs or not in how the experience might enrich their lives.

The paper poses the following questions:

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