CHAPTER 17

«Professors of the Street»: Cognitive Justice in Times of 'Crisis'

Shirley Walters

Abstract:

Arundati Roy (2020) states that historically pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This chapter, set in the COVID-19 pandemic, centres the importance of cognitive justice which is an essential part of the struggles for justice against domination. Cognitive justice is used as a lens to explore the case story of Cape Town Together (CTT), which was a response to COVID-19. The social movement was built, bottom up, challenging the deep racial and class divides that are a signature of Cape Town. The concept of 'professors of the street' emerged as part of CTT. This concept is explored by locating it within the context of the pandemic and within CTT's learning/teaching/organising practices. It is argued that 'professors of the street' are a provocation to challenge the dominant knowledge hierarchies that prevail – it is a metaphor for the critical importance of grassroots, local knowledge in times of 'crisis'. The teaching/ learning /organising ethos within CTT provided fertile soil for «professors of the street» to emerge as an example of the enactment of cognitive justice within a crisis. The case story offers insights for organising for social-ecological justice in various 'crisis' situations.

Keywords: Cognitive Justice; COVID-19; Crisis; Social Movement Learning; Socio-ecological Justice

Introduction

«We are professors of the street», the singers proclaim in a short Hip Hop video made in late 2020 by local community activists in Cape Town, South Africa. Through song and dance, activists are celebrating Cape Town Together (CTT) which was launched in response to COVID-19. They are asserting the importance of the roles and responsibilities of local community activists in response to the pandemic.

In this chapter, building on previous research (Walters 2022), I explore what is meant by «professors of the street» by locating the notion within the context of the pandemic and within the learning/teaching/organising practices within CTT. I analyse these using cognitive justice as an analytical lens in order to probe more deeply the insights this case may have for organising social-ecolog-

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ical justice in various 'crisis' situations (I use 'crisis' in parenthesis as a 'crisis' for one may not be for another).

I start by situating myself in the story and by providing brief background to the research approach. I then present the case story of CTT within the socio-economic and political context of COVID-19 in South Africa, before analysing CTT teaching/learning/ organising practices. The question as to the meaning of «professors of the street», and its significance for responding to crises, threads through the text.

1. Research Approach

In presenting this case, I draw on my experience as an imbedded activist researcher in the CTT. Over two years I was co-convener of one of the Community Action Networks (CAN), the Newlands CAN, within CTT. In this capacity I not only participated in the specific CAN but also participated in the general CTT Administrative WhatsApp group and in various CTT general activities. Since CTT's formation, I have been collecting local media reports, reviewing literature (grey and otherwise), attending webinars, participating in local actions and debating with other scholar-activists, in order to deepen understandings of the COVID-19 crisis and CTT's responses to it. There has been an active Cape Town Together Facebook site which holds the history of much of the action and debates. This has been an important source of additional data as are conversations with key informants within CTT. I have analysed the CTT Admin WhatsApp conversations over a 2-month period to obtain a 'slice of life' of actions and concerns. The focused attention is particularly the first eighteen months of CTT's life from March 2020 to October 2021 when the immediate effects of the pandemic were most dramatic.

2. Civil Society Responds to COVID-19

In South Africa, as in many countries of the world, COVID-19 is a crisis on a crisis – it is a health crisis on top of existing social, economic, environmental and political crises. As a collective of health activists describe – every fault-line is exposed, for example, those with food security, and those who go hungry; those with jobs and the unemployed; those with water and sanitation and those without; those who drive cars and those in crowded public transport. As we said at the time, «we are all in the same storm but not in the same boat»!

On 27 March 2020, a hard lockdown was declared in South Africa to try to hold off the spread of the virus and with that, many people's lives were devastated. In less than a month, three million South Africans had lost their incomes and jobs, turning hunger from a problem to a crisis. Two of the three million who lost their livelihoods were women. Inequalities along traditional lines of race, gender, occupation, earnings, location and education have all grown significantly. COVID-19 made it even more difficult for poor and working-class women to feed their families. An unequal national situation had been made much worse.

Within a crisis, with the extent of injustices and inequalities being revealed for all to see, often a new social awareness arises. In response to the crisis, there are many examples of acts of human solidarity. As Mayo (2022) points out, there was phenomenal growth of mutual aid initiatives globally during COVID-19. This is both illustrative of the human spirit responding to hardships, and of the failure of market-led approaches to meeting people's needs. In such times, the voluntary and community sectors are propelled into action to fill the gaps between poor public services on the one hand and growing social need on the other.

Mutual aid has been located within the context of the failures of capitalism (Solnit 2020) and has a long history in anti-colonial and democratic struggles. In South Africa much has been written about the anti-apartheid movements, within which social solidarity initiatives flourished, for example, under the broad-based social movements of the United Democratic Front and the Black Consciousness Movement. Social solidarity initiatives strive to meet survival needs and to build shared understanding as the basis for addressing injustices. Some have also included pre-figurative initiatives where, for example, in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s many community organisations strove to achieve racial and gender justice through participatory democratic forms of organising within highly racialised, patriarchal, authoritarian conditions (Walters 1989).

Building on that history, an example of a solidarity initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic is CTT. It was formed as the COVID-19 pandemic was emerging in South Africa in mid-March 2020. A group of health practitioners, activists and community organisers identified the need for rapid, community-led mutual aid responses (van Ryneveld et al. 2020) – an organisational structure that would mirror the Coronavirus – adaptable, invasive, quick-footed. Like the virus it must bridge the «city's islands of wealth and poverty» (Mlungwana and Kramer 2020, 9). The envisioned structure had elements of the pre-figurative Gramscian notion of «building the new in the womb of the old» (Gramsci 1971, 207).

The group recognised that COVID-19, combined with the lockdown, would have serious impacts on every family in every community and that the most vulnerable people especially from poor and working-class homes would struggle. The group began by putting together an online toolkit encouraging people to organise into a network of autonomous, self-organised, neighbourhood-level Community Action Networks (CANs). The underlying premise was that many of the challenges arising from COVID-19 – both epidemiological and social – are responded to at the neighbourhood-level (van Ryneveld et al. 2020).

Within two months there were 160 self-organising CANs with 18.000 signed up members from across greater Cape Town as part of the network. The CANs existed across the range of Cape Town's extremely unequal neighbourhoods. As mentioned, CANs grew according to the different histories and conditions of their areas. In some cases, pre-existing neighbourhood structures such as street committees, faith-based groups, or residents' associations, worked alongside or together with the CAN. There were multiple opportunities for CANs to converge around specific nodes in the network offering spaces to share re-

sources, knowledge and to reflect and debrief on their experiences. There were also a number of thematic CANs working on resolving cross-cutting concerns like building sustainable food systems. There were logistical teams doing fact-checking of health information, and designing materials. These were posted on the Facebook site or shared on WhatsApp for general use.

The structure was de-centralised, non-hierarchical and self-organised and all parts of the structure were autonomous, while working within guiding principles (Cape Town Together 2020b). New thematic CANs grew organically in response to emerging needs, and old ones disintegrated as the energy of the group was needed elsewhere. There have been many challenges along the way with different CANs operating differently and sometimes with difficulty (van Ryneveld et al. 2020).

The CANs were encouraged to form partnerships across socio-economic areas so that middle- and working-class communities mutually supported one another. The underlying philosophy was that this was not individual charity but working together in social solidarity – it was in our collective interest to keep one another healthy. Much of the organising had to be virtual through the use of WhatsApp and other social media. Everyone worked on a voluntary basis. Besides learning how to fundraise, how to communicate within the CAN and across CANs, how to distribute the food and other goods, how to continually plan and adapt to changing conditions, there were opportunities organised by Cape Town Together co-learning coordinators for learning across the network through weekly co-learning events using Zoom software. The emphasis on individual and collective learning, both incidental and structured, was a feature of the network.

The first emergency actions by the CANs were to respond to water, food and health crises. They mobilised food parcels and community kitchens on a wide scale. They were able to respond more quickly and with more agility than government. They also provided hygiene products like hand sanitizers and masks to help protect communities. Newlands CAN, where I was a founding member, held various successful, virtual fundraisers in order to support our partner, Philippi CAN, in a working-class area about 20 km away. The community activists there arranged for distribution to the neediest families. While distributing food they would also convey information relating to COVID-19 and gender-based violence (GBV).

Before deepening discussion of the notion of «professors of the street» within the CTT teaching/learning/organising practices, I turn to the concept of cognitive justice as a lens to explore the questions more deeply.

3. Cognitive Justice: Recognizing Multiple Knowledges

Cognitive justice (Burt 2020) is an essential part of the struggles for justice against domination which recognises the validity of different ways of knowing. It is an ethical principle that equally values diverse sources of knowledge (knowers) without drawing conclusions about relative knowledge superiority. Cogni-

tive justice is not anti-science, as science is valid knowledge but it counters the idea that science has monopoly of valid knowledge. As Garlick (2017) states the notion of cognitive justice is a humanist concept but has been borrowed also to signify the importance of knowledge systems of other life forms.

Anthropocentric calls for including other knowledges from Indigenous, working-class people, in particular women, have long been part of bottom-up development discourses and community education (Chambers 1983). Capitalism (and colonialism) are built on alienations and hierarchical arrangements that are re-produced through separation, dispossession, divisions. Lange et al. (2021) describe Indigenous knowledge systems as profoundly relational across human and the more-than-human worlds. They argue that we need to move from the 'separation paradigm' which carries the techno-industrial values of Western Eurocentric culture, towards the 'relationality paradigm' that can take us beyond entrenched ways of thinking and being. Lange et al. are careful not to reinforce the dichotomy and argue that they do not see one paradigm replacing the other but there is a need for understandings «to be stretched toward deeper approaches that transform our very patterns of our thinking/being/doing» (2021, 25).

De Sousa Santos, informed by decolonial theory, highlights that the struggle for all forms of justice is inseparable from the struggle for cognitive justice and he introduces the idea of epistemicide, as «the murder of knowledge» (2014, 92) of 'the other', be it based on race, sex-gender, class, ethnicity, language, and so on. The ideology of science and technology has long dismissed other knowledges with women's embodied knowledge often referred to disparagingly as 'intuitive'.

De Sousa Santos (RIBOCA 2020) argues that COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the model of capitalist development is not sustainable. It marks a period which dramatizes the fragility and unsustainability of human life on the planet, particularly if the current model of development is maintained. De Sousa Santos points to paradigmatic shifts that are needed where the answer to this question changes diametrically: does nature belong to us or do we belong to nature? As he explains, ways of conceiving nature as an inert thing at humans' unconditional disposal is completely at odds with the conception of nature as the source of life, as the giver of life. The pandemic shows that the dominant conception of nature as a 'thing' is reaching a tipping point. There is an urgent need to shift fundamental beliefs that are woven tightly into the fabric of political social economic and cultural life which is placing the human species in jeopardy. As Nadeau (2023) argues, it's time to listen to the more-than-human world.

Cognitive justice is integral to decolonial struggles and an example of cognitive justice at work, is the move to reclaim *ubuntu* as important for the future. Ubuntu is an African worldview and philosophy – it is an African-wide ethical paradigm that expresses the obligation to look after one another and the environment – all our wellbeing is mutually contingent. Ubuntu literally means: a person is a person through other people. Historically ubuntu has been misappropriated and co-opted for opportunistic ventures; however, there are contemporary moves to tease out those tenets of ubuntu that could catalyze a project of radical transformation to a more ecologically just future. There is complemen-

tarity between ubuntu and Latin America's *buen vivir*. Both reject modernity's nature-society duality and regard restorative justice as the principal mechanism to achieve harmony with the cosmos (Terreblanche 2018).

Decolonising knowledge involves collective, systemic and systematic processes of dismantling the ways discourses and practices perpetuate cognitive injustices. The concept of cognitive justice illustrates how the legitimation of Western knowledge often involves an act of seizing power in the intellectual sphere by belittling or ignoring the knowledge held by diverse cultures and countries in the Global South – a form of epistemicide – central to the brutalising processes of colonisation (Ghosh 2021). The destruction of people went along with destruction of their knowledge. This seizing of intellectual power often includes the domination of mechanisms of knowledge generation such as the media, universities, internet resources, and professional institutions.

The quest for global justice, de Sousa Santos argues, must be premised upon the quest for global cognitive justice. One criticism of cognitive justice has been that, in its attempt to value local and Indigenous knowledge systems, all knowledge becomes viewed as relative or, alternatively, that Western science reduces the reality of Indigenous knowledge to a quaint pseudoscience. De Sousa Santos states that cognitive justice has nothing to do with relativism or with an anti-science stance. The centrality of social and cognitive justice calls for the centrality of the struggle against injustice since societies are structurally unjust. With this premise he has been developing the idea of the epistemologies of the south, epistemologies focused on validating knowledges born in struggle (de Sousa Santos 2014, 2018). All these knowledges are valid to the extent that they may also contribute to those struggles. This is a difficult point since it involves discussing epistemology as politics and politics as epistemology. But he invites us to have a deeper look into the reality that has been built on conceptions of neutral epistemologies. For centuries, the validity of science alone has been affirmed. This has led humans to the verge of an imminent, fatal ecological crisis and deepening inequalities.

Similar understandings are reflected in the praxis of ecofeminists who make a direct link between ecological degradation, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and racism. Cognitive justice is at the root of ecofeminism. They argue for the centrality of the knowledge and understandings of those people who are most marginalised and are on the front lines dealing with the fall-out of environmental destruction i.e., working class, poor, peasant and Indigenous women.

In pursuit of cognitive justice feminists highlight the importance of epistemology and methodology. They support participatory methodologies which acknowledge that learning is embodied and occurs through creativity in concert with intellectual, conceptually-based knowledge. Through visual arts, drama, photography, theatre, story-telling, people are helped to speak up and out. Feminists challenge dominant knowledge hierarchies which favor rational cognitive thought as epistemologically superior to embodied and experiential knowledge. Cooper (2020) extends discussion of the recognition of different knowledges by analyzing knowledge practices of trade unionists. She describes the braiding

together of contextual, experiential, and conceptual knowledges in trade union education which also challenge dominant knowledge hierarchies.

Similarly, learning within social movements occurs through the action which constitutes the movement. It occurs incidentally through participation and through intentional educational interventions. The educational and organisational practices are intertwined. As argued also by de Sousa Santos (2014), social movements are recognised for their cognitive praxis and are important generators of new knowledge and understandings. The presence of different knowledges is taken for granted where the scientific knowledge of, for example, biologists is brought together with the popular knowledge of communities. They form an ecology of knowledges where learning through activism can break down the invalid barrier between knowledge (the specialist) and ignorance (the non-specialist) (Walters and Burt 2022).

In summary, capitalism, colonialism, racism and patriarchy have been implicated in destroying other ways of knowing. Cognitive justice is an essential part of the struggles for justice against domination which recognises the validity of different ways of knowing, including epistemology and methodology. Cognitive justice is not anti-science, as science is valid knowledge but it counters the idea that science has monopoly of valid knowledge. Particularly through Indigenous people's influence, the humanist orientation of cognitive justice is expanded to include all life forms. We turn now to ask in what ways CTT is challenging dominant knowledge hierarchies and working for cognitive justice.

4. Teaching/Learning/Organising within CTT

CTT's heady ambition was to enable collective and adaptable responses to the pandemic while challenging the racialised, classed, sex-gendered ways in which the city was experienced by the majority – cognitive justice was an implicit value within the social movement. The organising had to be done, for the most part, virtually as COVID-19 had been contained through physical distancing, wearing masks, sanitising – for four months the hard lockdown meant the streets were empty and all organising was done remotely.

The first thing most members had to do, in order to participate, was learn to use WhatsApp more effectively and to use Zoom for virtual meetings and for teaching/learning. As data was expensive, ways were worked out early on to ensure funding for data was available for those who needed it. Learning was self-directed and through peer learning – those of us who were older were pleased to be assisted by younger members. There was constant exploration of more innovative ways to use the technologies which were also mutating. Learning/teaching/organising within times of COVID-19 embraced technologies to learn and organise in new ways.

Working with people across vast differences of experience, history, politics, economics, was possible because the immediacy of the local action was paramount. We were united around a common purpose i.e., a socio-economic and health crisis. Potential frictions around racialised, sex-gendered, or class identi-

ties, were absorbed, to be confronted later. Different members in the groups had different attributes – volunteers stepped forward to take the lead in areas where they were more experienced, others learnt by following the leader, whether it was setting up, making and distributing food in various ways; fundraising; or running a gender-based violence (GBV) campaign. We were learning through relational strategies and knowledge was imbedded within action.

Grappling with the notion of 'working in solidarity rather than for charity', challenged understandings of ways of working. In some instances, those from poorer communities were confident about what they needed and wanted and were able to articulate this to the more resourced partners; in other instances, these relationships were more fraught. In mainly middle-class communities, charity as a top-down form of assistance was perhaps more common than solidarity which was born out of a recreated sense of shared destiny – assessing how far CTT's approach has dented this reality requires further research.

The value of inclusivity was also carried through both in the responding to data inequality and in challenging contemporary knowledge hierarchies. This is demonstrated in the co-learning sessions, and in the leadership by CANs of different projects, including the regular collective writing of reflective articles in the media. As mentioned above, Cooper (2020, 71) very usefully analyses the knowledge practices within worker education. She highlights the importance of Gramsci's theorisation of the role of organic intellectuals in forging relationships between 'common sense' and 'good sense' – a process which helps transform popular knowledge (common sense) into 'good sense' where knowledge is systematised towards coherence and authority. These were roles that many of the CTT activists were performing.

Within CTT's the co-learning online events were structured around particular problems or issues with which CANs were concerned. CANs were encouraged to share their experiences and thinking about the particular issue. Another member (or an ally of the movement) with more 'epistemological authority' on the subject was invited to reflect back and add any additional perspectives. Through these processes new knowledge was co-constructed and fed back into the CANs and the movement as a whole. There was an ethos of knowledge democracy (Visvanathan 2005; Tandon et al. 2016). Individuals grew in confidence as they stepped forward to lead.

There was a practice of direct democracy which was both pragmatic and utopian. This occurred both through the experiences of horizontal, non-authoritarian ways of organising, and also through thinking deeply about alternatives. Deliberations on forward thinking issues like alternative food systems or the universal basic income grant (UBIG) were held through webinars and connecting with other movements – these encouraged members to follow Roy's (2020) injunction to use a pandemic as a gateway between one world and the next. COVID-19 illuminated how deeply implicated health, food, housing, energy, climate, economics, patriarchy and racism are with one another. Many community activists within the CANs took on roles of public educators and they gathered social data to provide local intelligence for the health system – they were referred to

as «professors of the street» (Whyle et al. 2020). They educated people about COVID-19, spreading updated information about the pandemic or about related issues like GBV. We turn now to probe this notion further.

5. «Professors of the Street»

The short video coordinated by community activists from different CANs is an example of collective learning/teaching/organising within CTT. Activists learn/teach/organise while making and disseminating the video and others learn through watching it. The video celebrates six months of CTT. It is a story of radical hope and imagination by a group of volunteers with little budget. They initiated the project and called on members of the different CANs to send video clips reflecting their activities. They edited and crafted it on behalf of all the CANs within CTT (Cape Town Together 2020a)[1].

The video shines a light on many of the complexities of the society i.e., the socio-economic inequalities, the diversity, the hope, the brutality – the «divided city». Through the video, the team is educating – they claim that «we are all professors of the street». They reinforce the health protocols of sanitizing hands, wearing masks, keeping physical distance from others and staying home. They do this in a seriously playful way to encourage all of us to continue to prevent the spread of the virus. They also show other struggles taking place within the crisis of the pandemic. People are losing their homes as they can no longer pay their rent; they occupy land illegally and police officers respond by demolishing their temporary shelter. Lives and livelihoods have been destroyed.

The words in the song register how the local context is inextricably linked to the global; how we are all in this together across social class and geographical distances. As they say, «none of us is safe unless we are all safe». They signal a need for social solidarity as «we are in this fight together, forever».

The activities of the CANs are portrayed with people in groups: digging and preparing food gardens; picking up garbage; dishing out food from large communal pots; delivering food parcels on bicycles and in wheel barrows; making posters and music to mobilise and educate; using social media to communicate and agitate.

Acknowledging the difficulties, the song also conveys a message of hope asserting the need to construct a new and different future through collective action: «Together we can build back better». They signal the need to dream, to imagine alternatives, and suggest that through collective action alternatives can be realised. Inferred in the video are both moral and political relationships of solidarity. With the video as a point of reference, what is understood by being «professors of the street»? University professors have expertise within particular areas of specialisation. A popular understanding is that they are at the apex of

[1] You can watch it on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTyacJioDsA> (2023-07-01).

a knowledge hierarchy. In this video clip the community activists are teaching about the Coronavirus and ways to mitigate the spread. They are gathering social data to deepen understandings of what is happening. They are demonstrating knowledge of organising and mobilising within their communities; they have a fine-grained understanding of the needs «on the street»; they are promoting social solidarity through caring for others; they are inspiring communities to dream of alternatives. They are taking leadership. They have specialist knowledge.

In an article in a local online newspaper (Whyle et al. 2020), there is a report on the ability of one of the leading South African epidemiologists to communicate highly complex material in ways the general public can understand. The article also acknowledges that like COVID-19, symptoms of hunger, joblessness, stigma and xenophobia, are at risk of spreading through communities like wildfire. Finding and extinguishing the sparks of stigma, xenophobia, hunger and poverty cannot be achieved through the collection of epidemiological data. Rather this requires social data, collected and reported by «professors of the street», based on real-world experience. One of their examples illustrates how fear, stigma and xenophobia had led a woman, who thought she was COVID-19 positive, to run away from an ambulance and go to her sister's where the neighbours threatened to burn down the house if she stayed. They believed she would spread the virus. Wherever she went in the next few days she was not welcome, partially because she was potentially infectious and partly because she was not South African. It demonstrated fear, ignorance, xenophobia at play. It needed more knowledgeable community activists who were on the spot to intervene.

The dominant public discourse during COVID was that of medical professionals, trying their best to explain a complex, ever-changing reality to the general population. There was some cursory acknowledgement that medical science was limited and that different perspectives of sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, educators, community workers etc., were also needed to throw light on the impact of the pandemic. How far this happened is uncertain – it wasn't common in South Africa. In addition, fine grained data on what was actually happening 'on the ground' was limited.

The ways countries were responding to the crisis primarily through the medical model, are being critiqued as reflecting western scientific, patriarchal mindsets that operate according to a particular hierarchy of knowledge (i.e., a particular way of gathering evidence is seen as better than others) and devalues or erases Indigenous health knowledge and ways of healing, leading to a form of epistemic injustice (Shannon et al. 2022).

The CANs, organising at local neighbourhood level, were generating some of this much-needed social data or community-level intelligence. In the national TV and radio broadcasts on the health crisis a question was posed, «Where are the professors and epidemiologists of the street, who can speak to the crucial truths of hunger, homelessness and precarity that this pandemic has laid bare?». In a small way, local knowledge of working-class activists was validated as being essential to understand and inform responses to the pandemic. National and provincial governments were urged to listen much more closely to these people.

It is, however, one thing to acknowledge their importance but an entirely different matter to ensure that 'really useful knowledge' from «professors of the street» is validated and supported over time.

The gendered nature of «professors of the street» is also an important dimension. Women make up the majority. This is not unexpected – as ecofeminist scholars, Breunig and Russell (2020, 704) argue, women have internalised the sense of responsibility to 'do their bit' for their community and have taken up the duties left by gaps in social services, willingly and publicly. To understand this phenomenon, they emphasise the intersection of patriarchy (a hierarchical system that privileges men and maintains gender inequity) and neoliberalism which encourages individualised and privatised solutions to public problems. Both emphasise the gendered nature of unpaid caring work, whether for the family or community, that is expected of women and leaves them and others in their circle emotionally and physically exhausted.

«Professors of the street» are gendered, raced and classed – the marginalisation of women's knowledge and that of all black, poor and working-class people, is being highlighted through the provocative, serious, playful, ironic use of the concept, «professors of the street». The concept may be interpreted as urban-centric as most rural areas have tracks and paths, rarely streets! It can be seen as a cry from those whose knowledge is regularly dismissed and undervalued, to get validation for their knowledge and insights.

In summary, the notion of «professors of the street» challenges the idea that it is only scientists whose knowledge has value – it calls out cognitive injustice by asserting the value of community-based knowledge, particularly that of women, black and working-class people in general. «Professors of the street» are knowledgeable about local conditions and are able to inform understandings of the intended and unintended consequences of policies and practices. They are the monitors of the impact of intersecting crises that are playing out simultaneously. They are also acting collectively both to mitigate the risks and to encourage dreams about alternative socially just futures. However, as Astrid von Kotze, in conversation with the author, cautioned, language matters. While «professors of the street» is used with a great degree of irony and playfulness, if the language took root, it could have unintended consequences to reinforce elitism of professors!

6. Cognitive Justice in Times of 'Crisis'

Community health scholars in an analysis of five case studies from different geographical locations, including South Africa, highlighted intersections of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination with other systems of oppression, how it affects health and what can be done about it (Shannon et al. 2022). They show that in the context of COVID-19, pre-existing forms of marginalisation and injustice have sharpened dramatically.

The Health CAN concurs:

> [...] what became heartbreakingly clear in the past three weeks, the consequences of this epidemic are not simply epidemiological. The people of South Africa are suffering not only symptoms of Covid-19, but also, and arguably to an even greater extent, from the symptoms of hunger, joblessness, stigma, and xenophobia. And just like the coronavirus, these pathologies are at risk of spreading through our communities like wildfire (Cape Town Together 2020b).

What both Shannon et al. (2022) and the Health CAN (Cape Town Together 2020b) agree is the central importance of drawing on community-level knowledge to better understand how intersecting forms of oppression play out at the hyper-local level and the best strategies to mitigate them. The sparks of unrest and injustice, of fear and anxiety, and poverty and despair, that turn neighbours into strangers and communities into bubbling cauldrons waiting to boil over, must be collected and reported by «professors of the street» based on real-world experience.

Every crisis has unintended or unexpected consequences and the job of every government official, politician or bureaucrat must be to minimise their impacts as far as possible. This can only be achieved if they listen to, and take seriously, stories of grassroots people. They can learn so much from just listening to people's experiences, paying attention to community-level intelligence being generated by those organising at the neighbourhood level. It's imperative that space is made for bottom-up intelligence to inform responses to crises.

Validation of multiple knowledges are of course not only critically important for the crisis response, but for 'using every crisis as an opportunity' for transformative action towards greater justice for the majority. The CTT was a crisis response strategy which used the moment to identify alternative bottom-up ways of organising within intersectional crises of health, hunger, homelessness, gender-based violence, stigma, xenophobia.

Neoliberal, patriarchal, racial capitalism is the dominant order which privileges men and white people, while encouraging individualised and privatised solutions to public problems. During the pandemic, a top-down, elitist, Western medical model dominated. The community-led responses to COVID-19 through CTT, was a counterpoint which used relational organisational strategies which were feminist, collectivist, intersectional, decentralised. Cognitive injustice was understood to be the norm, therefore organisational strategies which strove for cognitive justice were embraced. These shaped the organisational culture which enabled 'professors of the street' to emerge.

To summarise, important elements within this strategy were:

- Emphasis on solidarity rather than charity;
- Horizontal participatory democratic forms of organising;
- Acknowledging that it is in action that different knowledges are assumed as people with diverse backgrounds respond to particular issues;
- Expert knowledge is drawn on across the network – epistemological authority moves depending on the need;

- Learning/teaching is consciously placed at the centre through planned interventions and experientially, everyone learns, everyone teaches;
- Information flow is open and accessible;
- Organising includes political actions to oppose certain government decisions;
- Imagining alternative, hopeful futures;
- Organisational, political and pedagogical work are intertwined.

Cognitive justice which embraces multiple knowledges is essential in response to crises of all kinds. The question is, within neo-liberal capitalism, where individual competitive behaviour is rewarded and state support shrinks, how are community-level facilitators, mediators, educators, «professors of the street» to be validated and supported? The danger is that even if their work is seen as essential, it can translate into another layer of unpaid, women's care work. At a recent gathering, a community activist asked «will we give our knowledge for free, in a world which has commodified knowledge for profit?». This is an important, cautionary note given the widespread exploitation of knowledge for profit and power.

We are at a time when interrelated social, economic, health and ecological crises are coming at us thick and fast – whether drought, bushfires, heat, floods, hurricanes, food insecurity, gender-based violence, or health pandemics. Learning how to mitigate these crises in the interests of the majority, to minimise the fallout and build alternatives, is essential. Cognitive justice is concerned with both epistemology and methodology. The notion of «professors of the street» which emerged within Cape Town Together is a metaphor for turning hierarchies of knowledge upside down. It is a concept that Lalage Bown would have supported wholeheartedly. It raises questions about whose and what knowledge is central in a given time and place. It affirms the importance of de Sousa Santos' idea of an ecology of knowledges. It is a radical act which embraces a way of being that respects Life, meaning all life forms and processes (Lange 2023).

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