Engaging With the Critical: Thinking Through Communication Injustices

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Article Information

Abstract

In the paper, the authors argue for the importance of a critical onto-epistemological positioning to reframe our understanding of the concept of communication and how this could guide our practices within Speech-Language Pathology. Using power as a concept from which we 'think from' when using a critical social theoretical perspective, additional concepts are illuminated which will enable the profession to think otherwise in approaching its practices. These concepts include communication disadvantage and communication injustice. Taken together, they can be used to explain how colonial power structures that oppress certain social groups impact freedoms, and subsequently communication opportunities. Using an example from the first author's doctoral study, we demonstrate how using such a critical onto-epistemological perspective can create practices that more appropriately engage contextually-embedded social realities.

Revisiting her experiences of research during her PhD study through her reflective journals, Kristen reflected on the following:

> In 2015, I started my PhD focusing on community practice in speech-language pathology (SLP) which focused on documenting the experiences of 4th year speech-language pathology (SLP) students as they negotiated an unfamiliar practice in a marginalized community (Abrahams, 2019). The practice was guided by a critical community development framework, Occupation-based Community Development (Galvaan & Peters, 2017). The framework is positioned as a critical approach to understanding everyday occupation as a catalyst for societal change. This idea was very interesting in that occupation is situated as emerging within context, that is, occupation is shaped by the broader contextual factors that mold how occupation can be enacted (Galvaan & Peters, 2017). Using this framing required the students to work differently, resituating their focus toward developing a critical understanding of communication in the community as a lynchpin for exploring the contribution of SLP (Abrahams et al., 2024). Years later, I realized the discomfort that the students felt wasn't just with the practice itself (in which they were required to expected work differently) but it required a deep onto-epistemological shift from positivist to critical. This shift wasn't only linked to what we *do* as speech-language pathologists but how we *think* and make sense of communication in context. It is this learning that informs the writing of this paper.

In the paper we describe the dominant positivist framing of communication within SLP that has shaped the profession's values, principles and practices. We challenge this dominance by exploring the emergence of critical theory within the profession as an alternative theoretical lens for shedding new light onto our understanding of communication. We will demonstrate how using a critical theoretical framing offers an important opportunity to introduce, define and describe the concept of communication injustice into the professional lexicon. Using Kristen's reflections as a reference point, we take the reader along the journey of discovery that led to this emerging understanding of the political nature of communication and highlight how this may help us (re)shape our potential contribution to society.

Situating Communication Within Its Dominant Framing

Professional practice in SLP consists of our clinical practice, associated practice policies and guidelines, education, and research (Pillay et al., 1997). These are shaped by our onto-epistemological paradigms, that is, our perspectives of the world around us and how those perspectives meaningfully shape knowledge (Pillay et al., 1997). The dominant paradigm influencing knowledge generation and construction in the profession has been positivism (Hyter, 2022; Nyantakyi & Oetting, 2023; Pillay & Kathard, 2018), which positions knowledge as an absolute and singular truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Many

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authors have documented the contribution of positivism in knowledge generation in SLP and have criticized its narrow, technical understanding of communication and SLP practices (Abrahams et al., 2019; Hyter, 2022; Nair et al., 2023; Pillay & Kathard, 2018). These authors have further argued that colonialism and coloniality are embedded in the dominant structures.

The consequences of using a positivist lens have resulted in practices that focus largely on fixing deficits through repairing the discrete elements of language (e.g., form, content, use) to what are referred to as within 'normal limits' (Kovarsky & Walsh, 2011). Language is reduced to speech and writing systems, which excludes other forms of languaging like gesture, touch, and art, resulting in the othering of forms of languaging that fall on the margins (Henner & Robinson, 2023). Similarly, our knowledge through evidence-based practice has been criticized for its medical focus that excludes black, indigenous, people of color (Khamis-Dakwar & Randazzo, 2021).

We believe that the dominant model of communication underpinning our practice has been the idea of information-sharing (Kovarsky & Walsh, 2011). Shannon and Weaver (1948), two engineers working for Bell Telephone Company, were interested in understanding how a message was conveyed from the speaker to the listener through a telephonic conversation. They developed a model of communication called the Shannon-Weaver model. Using the basis of this model, other communication models have been developed that draw inspiration from this idea of information exchange, including the Speech Chain model proposed by Denes and Pinson (1963) and the Communication Chain (Williamson, 2001). The core elements of the Communication Chain consider the production, transmission, and reception of a message and outline the key cognitive, linguistic, and physiological elements that constitute the expression and comprehension of a message (Williamson, 2001). This historical account helps us to see how communication was initially positioned and developed as a concept for understanding the act of 'producing' speech as a way of communicating a message. This directed a focus on communication breakdowns at different levels of the chain and thus delineated our efforts in the development of SLP toward practices that understand communication largely in terms of *disorder*. Henner and Robinson (2023), through using Crip Linguistics, have further argued that such an understanding results in arbitary binaries between normal and disordered communication that sustain the othering of otherwise communication. Through this example, we argue that foundational understandings of communication that have influenced the development of the profession (such as the Communication Chain) have resulted in a focus on the identification and management of communication breakdown because of difficulty with speech, language, hearing, fluency, voice, or literacy. Because the focus is on understanding communication *deficits* using assessment, diagnosis of disorder and *individualized* intervention strategies informed by a positivist approach to knowledge and practice, interventions are generally within institutions (e.g. school, hospital, clinic) and are implemented to remediate the problem (Barbour, 1995). The dominance of individualized assessment and treatment largely serves the individual and their family, with limited consideration of the impacts of broader societal factors shaping *how*, *where,* and *why* communication occurs as it does within different social spaces. Nair et al. (2024) further argued that a focus on the individual systematically seeks to marginalize and oppress those who fall on the margins of what is considered 'normal' communication. While we further acknowledge the links between coloniality and capitalism and the influence on how we think about disability (Nair et al., 2023), a discussion and integration of how capitalism is interwoven with coloniality is beyond the scope of this paper.

While the framing described has been helpful to understand certain aspects of communication disorder, breaking down communication in such a piecemeal way, doesn't acknowledge the complexities of communication (Pillay & Kathard, 2018) nor does it allow for a full articulation of human communication as it occurs in (different) contexts (Kathard & Pillay, 2013). Framing our work in this manner situates our understanding of communication as generated within the individual, with limited consideration of their environment, resulting in a decontextualized understanding of communication (Kovarsky & Walsh, 2011). For instance, authors within SLP have argued that, within the profession, communication has been largely conceptualized through a white, able-bodied, middle class, English, monolingual, heteronormative lens which has underscored our practices (Brea-Spahn & Bauler, 2023; Pillay & Kathard, 2018) with limited systemic and sustainable change in this regard. As such, professional understanding of communication positions it as universal without recognition that communication occurs in contexts and that the historical colonial development of SLP is implicated in the ongoing invisibilization of the contextual embeddedness of how communication occurs and, more importantly, how we construct our contribution with respect to human communication in the profession. Our professional practices are complicit in furthering the marginalization of social groups that fall outside of the 'normative' and universal framing of communication. As a consequence, our contributions do not extend to those populations whose everyday communication is shaped by context (and not framed as 'disorder'), and the consequent impact on their prosperity and development (Kathard & Pillay, 2013). Through uncritical engagement with this onto-epistemological positioning, we will continue to maintain and perpetuate marginalization and oppression, creating, reinforcing, and contributing to disability and social injustice.

Contribution of Critical Theory to Understanding Our Work

Pillay et al. (1997) argued that while using a positivist approach to knowledge has been useful, it is important

to 'choose the outfit to suit the occasion' (pg. 144). In other words, we need to reflect on which paradigmatic 'outfit' would be most suited to addressing the contextual realities that shape communication. There is a growing body of literature in SLP that is moving away from positivism and instead anchoring itself in critical theory (Hussain et al., 2023). The key tenets of critical theory include: (1) developing an understanding of people and society, which aims to explain how systems work to inhibit freedom. We align our understanding of freedom with the work of Sen (1999). Robeyns and Byskov (2025) contend that "[r]eal freedom in this sense means that one has all the required means necessary to achieve that doing or being if one wishes to. That is, it is not merely the formal right or freedom to do or be something, but the substantial opportunity to achieve it". Critical theory foregrounds marginalization and oppression, together with their links to systemic inequality, with the aim of raising consciousness and developing a deep understanding of these issues. This emphasizes understanding the social, political, historical and cultural factors shaping human experience (Carr & Kemmis, 1986); and (2) beyond the focus on meaning making described under the first tenet, critical theory forefronts emancipation as a key objective towards the elimination of oppression, dominance and injustices, to overcome the social problems facing society (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

This critical turn in SLP has begun to create important awareness of dominant colonial ideologies that pervade our practice (Abrahams et al., 2019; Brouse, 2023; Hussain et al., 2023; Samaraweera et al., 2024). Supporting this growing critical consciousness is the focus generated through using a critical social theory lens that foregrounds our efforts toward emancipation i.e. not only the naming of the injustice but the growing call to contribute to changing the structures/systems that create and perpetuate it (Brea-Spahn & Bauler, 2023; Hussain et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2022). This is a challenge to the profession to actively search for ways of knowing, doing, and being that acknowledge and appreciate all that makes us human (Brea-Spahn & Bauler, 2023). In so doing, we are creating avenues towards freedoms in and of communication that are not limited by colonial hegemonies. The critical turn calls for an expansion of our onto-epistemological foundations from our colonial roots, which has also been emphasized as being of importance in other disciplines [see, for instance, Laliberte Rudman (2013)].

Scholars in SLP have been exploring how to develop our critical consciousness around the ways in which colonial logic and values inform what we do in the profession. For example, Nair et al. (2023) argued for the importance of taking a critical perspective of the ways in which racist, capitalist and ableist ideologies inform standardized testing to empower clinicians to work against the tools that oppress Majority World people and contribute to white supremacy. Similarly, Brea-Spahn and Bauler (2023) describe a critical thinking framework that focuses on naming, disrupting, reframing and reflecting as a call to action to change practices in SLP. Using this framework, they

unmask dominant language ideologies and practices in SLP and reflect on ways in which we can disrupt and act in ways that can bring about systemic change. Pillay and Kathard (2018) presented the Equitable Population Innovations for Communication (EPIC) framework as a model for change in the profession that shifts our thinking toward population-based approaches that contribute to creating a more fair and just society through our work in communication for SLP. Bermúdez Jaimes (2022) challenged the dominant normalization of the body through ableism. She positioned SLP as contributing to the perpetuation of this hegemonic model of the body through how the profession was conceived and continues to practice. She puts forward cripistemology (i.e. 'embodied forms of knowledge that legitimize the experiential wisdom inquiring into the relationship between epistemology and identity', pg. 6) as a new ontological positioning that will require SLP to reimagine its practice. She positions this ontological shift as having the power to transform the profession. Hussain et al. (2023) conducted a scoping review to detail the current critical landscape in communication sciences and disorders. The authors found the profession continues to privilege white, Western imperialist cultures in theory, knowledge production, and approaches. Their findings further showed the growing body of literature that used criticality as a central lens, which sought to challenge the current power structures and relationships, work toward equity, and think critically about pathology and marginalization. Privette (2023) uses a critical praxis to explore language using critical theory and challenges the reader to (re)consider ways in which we can center identity formation and multimodal communication, with particular emphasis on race.

This critical turn in the profession is calling on SLP practitioners to acknowledge the ways in which social disadvantage (i.e., poverty, violence, food insecurity etc.) and positionality (race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.) shape and influence communication disorders (Kathard & Pillay, 2013). Emphasis is not only on inequitable access to health services once a communication disorder is experienced, but is also focused on the nature of the services themselves. That is, how – and whether - the social conditions in which people live are taken into account and addressed with respect to the everyday realities and experiences of communication. These services, however, will not be directed appropriately without an alternative theoretical framing of communication as a concept. In the next section, we explore and describe how the concept of communication might be (re)positioned using power as a key reference point, encompassed in a critical social theoretical frame.

Repositioning Communication as Political

Kathard and Pillay (2013) put forward the concept of political consciousness in SLP, that is, the awareness of the social, political, cultural, economic, and personal forces, systems, and structures that create and perpetuate inequity and therefore injustices. The idea of polit-

ical consciousness is particularly useful as it challenges the profession to delve deeper into the realities of everyday communication and the factors that shape it. Conceptually, it requires SLP to shift our onto-epistemological orientation from communication disorder to include *communication disadvantage* – that is, the ways in which opportunities for communication are a direct consequence of the social and economic conditions in which people live. Reframing our perspective in this way requires a deeper, more critical engagement with the social, political, economic, and historical factors that shape and influence how we engage in society. In other words, this perspective of communication demands an engagement with the contextual factors that shape how people, particularly those from marginalized communities, experience communication, and potentially communication disadvantage, that leads to and perpetuates social exclusion.

Understanding communication disadvantage is important because, if left unaddressed, it may lead to *communication injustices*. We define communication injustice as the "consequence of the political and historical conditions that create and sustain the ongoing patterns of marginalization that impact opportunities for communication, equitable access to labor, education and social citizenship" (Abrahams et al., 2024, p. 2). To explain further, continued communication disadvantage leads to less/low quality opportunities for learning, working and earning in an increasingly communicative society, which ultimately creates the context for communication injustices (Abrahams et al., 2024). The choice to engage in communication in ways that are politically, culturally, socially, and personally meaningful is an essential freedom, as it provides opportunities for learning, growth, development, and economic benefit. Limited opportunities to enact communication choices contribute directly to communication injustice (Abrahams et al., 2024).

A focus on communication injustices shifts our attention toward how communication, constructed in a particular way, shapes the opportunities people have/do not have to engage in society and live prosperous lives. This necessitates a deeper consideration of the contextual factors shaping human experience and requires SLP practitioners to think beyond the individual and consider how societal structures shape communication. This shift moves the locus from situating communication disorder within the individual to the macro societal influences that create disadvantage and preempt communication injustices. This shifting locus must therefore prompt a repositioning of intervention from the individual and their family, to the structures that maintain and sustain communication disadvantage (Kathard & Pillay, 2013).

Situating our understanding of communication using the concepts of disadvantage and injustice draws into focus the importance of *communication opportunities* in shaping the everyday experiences of communication as meaning-making. Opportunity, as a theoretical concept, holds importance for social change because of its intimate relationship with issues of inequity (Peters & Gal-

vaan, 2021). This reorientation requires us to think about the ways in which the core components of our work, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing, could be supported through everyday engagements. We argue that the onto-epistemological shift promoted in this paper can create opportunities for our profession to engage meaningfully in social change.

Implications of Thinking from a Critical Perspective of Communication

> The emergence of the concepts around communication injustice came through my continued engagement with a community development practice, one that I had initially engaged with during my PhD. As I began to rethink about the work, I began to reanalyze the meaning of the contributions of the practice and its meanings for communication – Kristen.

As a way to further illustrate the potential power of such an onto-epistemological shift, we represent a case discussed in another publication (Abrahams et al., 2024). The aim is to show how taking a critical perspective of communication and thinking about how communication injustices are produced and sustained can deepen how we conceptualize the 'problem' – what it actually is and how it manifests - and thereby expand the potential contribution of SLP. Previously, we have documented the development of a library manual to support children through a critical language transition in school from learning in their home language, isiXhosa, to English (Abrahams et al., 2015, 2024). The narrative account of the students' experience in community development practice in a marginalized community highlighted the layered complexity of communication and the importance of political consciousness to unmask the communication injustice. On the surface, learners were struggling in school with learning basic numeracy and literacy. However, when you look beyond the school itself, many schools in the community and beyond were struggling with the numeracy and literacy challenges, which have been well documented in the literature (Heugh, 2007; Janks & McKinney, 2022; Spaull, 2016). Through developing an understanding of the context, it became clear that within the community, not many people spoke English, nor was it the dominant language socially at the school. English was, however, the chosen language of teaching and learning. Children were struggling to learn in a language that they were not familiar with, resulting in many children failing. In particular, the transition from grade three to grade four was highlighted as an issue, particularly as learners transitioned from learning in their home language to learning in English. While an analysis of South African language policy indicated that children have the right to learn in their home language (Department of Education South Africa, 1997), schools choose to use English as the language of teaching and learning from grade four (Janks & McKinney, 2022). For the school, the choice to teach in English was strategic as many opportunities for further education and access to job opportunities were/are based on English proficiency

(Heugh, 2007). The communication challenge in the school was pervasive, not only within the one school that the students were at, but was reflective of many schools across South Africa.

When using a communication justice lens, the case demonstrates many examples of communication disadvantage, which have directly resulted in communication injustice. For instance, due to the social and economic circumstances in which the children grew up, children within this community did not readily hear or speak English. While not speaking English does not inherently put children at a disadvantage, once they enter the school system that expects a certain proficiency in English, the communication disadvantage is evident. Through their foundational schooling (age 7-9), children are expected to continue to develop their proficiency in English until the fourth grade, where they are expected to begin to learn and be assessed in English (Long & Bowles, 2024). With a lack of opportunities to learn English, this communication disadvantage becomes a communication injustice when many children begin to fail. Masses of children are failing not because they have a communication disorder but simply because they haven't had the same communication opportunities and because the educational system in South Africa emulates a colonial orientation i.e. universalizes and centralizes a white middle-class heteronormative cultural view as the gold standard (Abrahams et al., 2022, 2023; Khoza-Shangase & Mophosho, 2018).

At the micro level, it would be important to support learners to develop their understanding of English so that they could engage meaningfully in school which may foreground creating communication opportunities through school, home or community spaces. While such micro level interventions are important to address the immediate need, the story points to deeper issues within the curriculum, school system and government policies that contribute to the communication injustice. More broadly, communication injustices require SLP practitioners to engage politically and influence curriculum (Hussain et al., 2023) and governmental policies (Kathard & Pillay, 2013; Moonsamy et al., 2017), to advocate for translanguaging [i.e., "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named...languages" (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 283), and the importance of early communication opportunities for children in marginalized communities (Moonsamy & Carolus, 2019). Specifically, this means re-centering African languages and working with children, their families, and communities (Khoza-Shangase & Mophosho, 2018). For example, this may involve promoting bilingualism, development of African language learning resources, and practices that provide clinical (and theoretical) frameworks (Pillay, 2001). This form of historical restorative linguistic justice is an essential stream in decoloniality (Pillay et al., 2024). The work to address communication injustices is therefore multifaceted – it is not sufficient to only work at the level of the individual learner as the system will continue to perpetuate the communication in-

justice, even if an individual learner overcomes the disadvantage. It is then essential SLP practitioners begin to engage within meso- and macro-level structures to disrupt dominant oppressive communication structure and to advocate for equity (Kathard & Pillay, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper has introduced the concepts of communication disadvantage, communication injustice, and communication opportunity as conceptual tools that can be used to engage a critical social theory perspective that enhances SLP's contribution to social justice. In doing so, we have advanced a theoretical argument, drawing on some examples from research, that challenges the dominant positivist onto-epistemological positioning of the profession and creates an opening for a professional contribution that deliberately engages with the social realities that shape marginalized social groups. The work and its concepts are emerging and are by no means fully formed or solidified. This paper presents our initial thinking and understanding of it as it has emerged in context. As we end, we invite you to consider, "how might engaging a critical onto-epistemological positioning (re)shape your practice?"

Positionality Statements

Kristen is a Senior Lecturer in Speech-Language Pathology in the Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Cape Town. Growing up in a post-apartheid context in South Africa, she was confronted with the color of her skin through her daily interactions. These interactions moulded and shaped her in meaningful ways and have contributed to her commitment for social justice. It was through her PhD and engagements with critical theory and decolonial thinking that this passion truly surfaced and has since continued to grow stronger through her journey into motherhood.

Liesl is a Lecturer in Occupational Therapy in the Sydney School of Health Sciences in the Faculty of Medicine and Health and an honorary Lecturer in the Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Cape Town. Whilst she identifies as a white, cisgendered, middle-class womxn who is an Afrikan occupational therapist, she simultaneously resists the imposition of these identities as constituting all she is as a human being. Instead, she acknowledges the ongoing work that remains in navigating the intersections of her identity and accounting for the privileges attached to aspects of these in her own discipline and society at large. She is deeply grateful for her work in community development practice in occupational therapy which has allowed her to continue to recover her relational humanity in the context of a dehumanizing (and ever present) history.

Mershen: I am from South Africa (SA), an audiologist and speech-language therapist, gay, cis man, person of colour from a working-class background. I've navigated

academic and clinical corridors with my insider-outsider identities learning that our most powerful stories emerge from intersections others might call "complications". I have mainly worked in the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and now New Zealand – with short engagements of teaching or researching with colleagues in North America, Latin America, Africa and Asia. For 33 years, this shaped my work, understanding power and inequities through teaching/researching. My Western academic training required deliberate unlearning to appreciate other ways of knowing. I prioritise community engagement/collaborative methods to restructure traditional power hierarchies, centring marginalised, impoverished peoples while nurturing critical consciousness in healthcare professionals. Rehabilitation should sound like the communities we serve, not the textbooks that taught us. I'm here to create, and fall wildly in love with possibility.

I am Harsha Kathard, a black, speech-language therapist and academic, politically conscious of how communication injustices and disability erasure are embedded in coloniality. My experiences and observations of discrimination and inequalities in colonial, apartheid and neo-apartheid South Africa angers me and shaped my critical worldviews and ongoing actions to create more inclusive, equitable societies. My teaching, research and professional practices are guided by critical reflexivity, intersectionality, and decolonial methodologies enunciated from a Global South perspective, to advance equitable, innovative, population-based communication practices.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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