

Constructing Subjectivity: An Analysis via Advice Columns

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### **Abstract**

A sample of advice columns from the 1950s through to the 2000s was collected from South Africa's black family magazine *Drum*. This sample was then analysed, with the intention of describing the nature of advice directed at a black-African readership. The material was used more generally to reflect on the construction of the subjectivities of readers over this time period. One question-and-answer unit from five randomly selected *Drum* magazines in each decade between 1952 and 2004 was selected for analysis. Four recurring themes in Western advice-column material have been identified by previous research: changing gender expectations, the emergence of an open culture towards matters of sexuality; the open expression of feelings towards undesirable or inappropriate behaviour; and a drift towards a therapeutic culture. While all four themes were found to be present within the *Drum* sample, the content of the themes varied from that in the existing literature in relation to its time of prominence. Moreover, two new themes emerged from the sample at hand, namely, a change in attitude towards infidelity and its associated risks, and a consistent attribution of importance to parents. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of their role in the construction of black-African subjectivity and the consequences thereof. A critical look into the usefulness of advice columns as a source of subjectivity construction is encouraged as a future direction.

*Keywords:* advice columns; *Drum* magazine; black African subjectivity; gender roles; individual; culture of openness; emotion; therapeutic culture

## Introduction

The construction of subjectivity is concerned with the social construction of our inner psychic worlds. Our personal identity, or the way in which we recognise ourselves, is constructed through our dialogue with language, other people, and society—to such an extent that it has become part of a normative public reality (McCallum, 2008). Rather than originating within our own private realms, our inner worlds—such as our emotions, desires, personalities and personal relationships—have become socially constructed and managed (Wilbraham, 1994). According to McCallum, representations of subjectivity frequently pervade written texts. These representations provide readers with social ideologies, according to which they then construct their subjectivities. For this reason, one way to empirically investigate subjectivity is by means of advice texts. Since advice first appeared in London's *Post-Angel* newspaper in 1701, these texts have become popular sections within published magazines worldwide (Phillips, 2008). While these sections initially dealt with questions stemming from a variety of topics, most magazine advice columns have come to focus exclusively on personal-relationship issues. Subjectivity construction may therefore be investigated through the relationship-advice texts published within popular magazines, especially since conceptions of subjectivity are, according to McCallum, naturally contained within narratives about the relationships between individuals and society.

Research into the construction of subjectivity, via the analysis of advice columns, is important for two reasons. Firstly, these question-and-answer sections replicate the discourse and practice with which we shape our perceptions and our subjectivities in life (Wilbraham, 1997); they thereby manage the personal and social identities of advice-column readers (Currie, 2001). Since advice columns are frequently published within magazines, these columns may reach—and influence the identities of—a vast number of people. Circulation statistics can be used as a rough estimate of the number of South Africans influenced by these columns. For example, the local *YOU* and the international *Cosmopolitan* magazines, both of which contain relationship-advice columns, have current circulations of 165 330 and 83 049 respectively, in South Africa alone (Manson, 2013). Secondly, as will be demonstrated later, existing literature on advice columns has shown that advice content, and therefore subjectivity construction, has undergone numerous changes over time, as various socio-historical events have emerged and developed. It is therefore important to analyse the changes in advice-column content over time, in order to assess how the subjectivities of those who implement this advice have been influenced over time.

## **Research on the Construction of Subjectivity within Advice Columns**

Previous research on advice columns has found evidence of historical shifts in advice-column content. In the relevant literature, these shifts are illustrated via the emergence of four main themes. Changes in advice related to the following four themes were found to be key: (i) gender expectations; (ii) the emergence of an open culture towards matters of sexuality; (iii) the open expression of feelings towards undesirable or inappropriate behaviour; and (iv) a culture of therapy.

**Changes in gender expectations.** The independence of women and the increasing domestication of men have become important factors within Western society (Jansz & Van Drunen, 2004). Between the 1950s and early 1960s, because men and women were expected to behave in accordance with traditional gender roles, advice in the United States (US) edition of the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan*, aimed at a white readership, stated that women should always obey their husbands and deflect any negative emotions by changing themselves to make their men feel satisfied (Gupta, Zimmerman & Fruhauf, 2008; Kidd, 1975). To think of the self first was seen as an unloving act and a source of disagreement and conflict within relationships.

From the early 1960s, though, advice has emphasised the importance of “being the real self”, where women are primarily advised to seek self-fulfilment, and to express both positive and negative emotions, because failure to do so will result in dissention and destructive build-up (Post, 2004). Women, as of the 1970s, are now advised to stand up for their rights of freedom and independence and to avoid their traditional duties of domestication and obedience through what has been called “domestic disobedience” (Brinkgreve & Korzec, 1979). Some advice directed at women today, however, still defines their priority as pleasing men, in a kind of gesture of self-sacrifice, especially with regard to sexual matters (Tiainen, 2009). Women are advised to pay endless attention to their partners and are expected to be able to “read the signs” if their partners are unsatisfied (Gill, 2009). Women's partners are therefore still portrayed as the dominant members within their heterosexual relationships. This portrayal undermines the position of women in such relationships.

From 1980 onwards, letters from, and advice towards, women began to touch on their insecurities about their futures and their concerns about female unemployment, which demonstrates women's emerging preoccupation with their independence (Post, 2004). This era could therefore be seen as the moment at which the roles of women began to change, as women began to enter into the traditionally male realm of financial independence. One can observe from

these changes in advice how “the individual” is starting to emerge and be constituted, with women now encouraged to become more autonomous individuals.

The roles of men seemed to change at a faster rate than did the roles of women. Men’s roles as fathers and husbands began to encroach on the traditionally female realm of domesticity at a much earlier time than the inverse. This is evidenced by the fact that female advisers in as early as the 1890s would argue that men should help their wives around the house (Marsh, 1988). This author also mentions that, at the beginning of the 1900s, although rather sporadically, male advisers began to agree with female advisers in this regard, and advised their readers of the same sentiments. This type of advice shows how the roles of men and women are constructed, with men’s physical and administrative responsibilities based at the workplace, rather than in the household, and household chores instinctively assumed to be the responsibilities of women.

Since the early 1960s, men have also been increasingly advised to try gain a richer understanding of women’s experiences and the way in which they think (Beggan, Gagne & Allison, 2000). In addition, these authors mention that advisors continually attempt to provide men with knowledge and interpretations of women and their actions. Men’s attention is thereby directed towards the acknowledgement that women are different in terms of thought and understanding, yet that they are equally important. Beggan et al. also found that since 1962, men are received sarcastically when questions about chastising women are posed in letters to advisors, or when generally negative attitudes towards women are expressed. This shows how men who display disparaging remarks about women are discouraged by advisers.

**The emergence of an open culture towards matters of sexuality.** Western culture has become more open to discussing sexuality, as is evident from previous analyses of advice columns. Between the 1940s and 1950s, matters of sexuality were considered taboo and verbally immoral. Since the 1960s, however, this topic has become a common theme of discussion in advice columns (Gudelunas, 2005). General advice-column content around homosexuality, for example, has become more open-ended, whereas in the past columnists considered homosexuality an abnormal and illegal act (Mutongi, 2000). Mutongi points out that readers experiencing homosexuality-related problems are now advised to “come out of the closet” and express whom they really are. This shows not only the presence of public discussion on a once-taboo topic, but also an acceptance of a practice previously considered both aberrant and abhorrent. Those expressing homosexual tendencies are no longer dismissed, and homosexuality

is portrayed as an act of normalcy. Homosexuality is, however, still marginalised and is not explicitly encouraged in magazines aimed at a white-female readership, like Australia's *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* (Boynton, 2007; Jackson, 2005).

**The open expression of feelings towards undesirable or inappropriate behaviour.**

Western advice has come to encourage women to express their feelings openly when their partners behave inappropriately. Before the onset of this trend, the Dutch magazine *Margriet*, which is targeted at white women, advised women to overlook their husband's inappropriate behaviours and disguise any feelings of hurt, stressing that love and understanding in their marriage were more important than petty habits and feelings (Brinkgreve & Korzec, 1979). However, these authors mention that with the recent shift towards open expression in the late 1970s, women are now encouraged to protest against inappropriate behaviours and express their wishes and feelings in discussions with their partners. This change in advice shows how women's feelings have been elevated in status, allowing women a sense of increased self-worth.

**A culture of therapy.** The existence of a newly psychologised and therapeutic culture represents a clear development in Western society. It has been observed that advice given to Dutch readers has become ever more professional in nature (Post, 2004). For example, between the 1940s and 1950s, advice was presented in an uncomplicated, straightforward, and unhesitant manner (Brinkgreve & Korzec, 1979). However, Post mentions that advice changed in the late 1990s, from being a presentation of positive attitudes towards problems, to being advice that is more concrete and that offers actual solutions to problems. Kirkman (2001) supports this claim: a review of Australia's *Women's Day* magazine, aimed at a white-female readership, found that the use of words such as "stress" and "depression" have become more common, and advice in the form of referrals to a psychologist have become prominent. In addition, in an analysis of the woman's *YOU* magazine, Wilbraham (1997) states that advice has become more centered on having the problem objectified by a professional, with the consequences of not following this step implicitly expressed. This type of advice formulates an idea in readers that seeking professional help is vitally important, and that their problems may otherwise not be solved or even become worse. These examples illustrate the emergence of a therapeutic culture that is concerned with the increasing influence of psychology and the rise of counselling within society (Wright, 2008).



## **African Psychology and the Construction of Subjectivity**

The subjectivities of the white, Western world have been regularly studied; all of the literature reviewed above has focused on this population group. However, in situations where a white, Western culture is not prominent, the subjectivities of advice-column readers may be constructed differently. Advice columns that appear in magazines aimed largely at a black African readership have not yet been explored. It could be argued that, just as an analysis of advice columns in magazines aimed at white, Western readers can be used to throw light on the construction of subjectivities, so too can an analysis of advice columns in magazines aimed at a different readership—such as a black-African readership—help us to understand the construction of subjectivity in such populations. Given the significant cultural differences between white and black-African populations, this type of research may be useful to explore. For example, unlike Western populations, African tradition does not emphasise being an individual; rather, it stresses the importance of interdependence and group orientation (Nobles, 2000). Moreover, this author mentions that while the explicit expression of feelings may be a relatively new development within Western cultures, black-African culture has long been associated with a sensitivity to affect and to the emotional cues of others, and thereby incorporates a consideration of other's emotions and calls for their emotional receptivity. Therefore, since such differences between the cultural characteristics of Western versus black-African traditions exist, it would be appropriate to analyse how the black-African population's subjectivities have and are being constructed, and how this contrasts with, or is similar to, the way in which Westernised populations' subjectivities are constructed. Such research may inform us about how people think of themselves in different cultures.

### **Summary**

Existing literature on advice columns has shown that white, Western advice content—and therefore subjectivity construction within this world—has undergone numerous changes over time in accordance with various socio-historical events. However, there seems to be a dearth of literature on the topic of advice columns aimed at black-African readerships like that typically found in South Africa, or elsewhere. Moreover, existing research was found to have focused primarily on advice directed towards women, while advice directed towards men has been neglected. Research into advice columns aimed at men and women within a black-African culture may provide the field with valuable information regarding a different population of magazine

readers and responders. The findings of such research can also be compared to corresponding findings from the Western world, and important inferences—such as any differences in advice content and in the subsequent construction of subjectivity—between Western and non-Western societies, as well as between white and black-African societies, can thereby be noted. The main aim of this research project was therefore to explore the nature of relationship advice given in a popular magazine directed at a mainly black-African readership, over different historical time periods. In more general terms, the intention was to use this advice to reflect upon how subjectivities are constructed for this population group. The four themes documented above served as a guide during this analysis.

## **Method**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research project is embedded within a qualitative research method of inquiry, defined as fundamentally concerned with describing and understanding social or cultural phenomena (Hancock, 1998). Underlying the findings of this research was the interpretation of what these findings *mean* for the population at hand, as a means through which the researcher attempted to *understand* the present phenomena. In order to accomplish these objectives, the researcher was required to adopt an interactive and interpretive position alongside the collected data, which position, according to Hancock, has been argued to facilitate the introduction of problems of objectivity. However, predetermined themes were used as a guide in the analytic process, with the researcher identifying these themes within randomly selected data (as described below). The occurrence of a problematic subjective bias, which may have arose through the systematic selection of advice column material to fit the predetermined themes, was thereby minimised. The researcher thus upheld an objective stance as far as possible with regard to the collection and interpretation of data.

The project's theoretical framework is located within a historical research paradigm, which is concerned with the finding, using, and interpreting of information, originating within primary or secondary sources, with the intent to both discover, and gain an understanding of, past events (Mason, McKenny & Copeland, 1997). Keeping this in mind, the historical researcher systematically and chronologically examines and analyses records that may contain valuable historical evidence from which conclusions that are relevant to the research question can be drawn (Hoepfl, 1997). This author states that the focus of this type of research is to relate

findings of the past to current and possible-future findings that may generate from the research topic at hand. In this way, a kind of relationship (or non-relationship) between the past and present may be determined.

A more specific method within historical research is that of comparative historical research. This is characterised by the addition of the comparative ability of historical research, such that it uses systematic comparison and process analysis to examine a sequence of events over a period of time (Lange, 2013). Since the researcher had empirical findings and findings from the literature review, a comparison of these findings was conducted, although not empirically. This comparative addition to the research design thereby contributed towards the discussion of the research findings.

### **Procedure**

Purposive sampling (Boeije, 2010) was used to select a sample of relationship-advice columns from the popular South African magazine *Drum*, which is aimed at black-African families. While *Drum* magazines from each decade between the 1950s and 2000s were initially selected, not all magazines within each time period were sampled due to the limited time frame of this research project. Rather, for each decade, five magazines, from a total of approximately 120, were randomly selected. From each of these five magazines, one random relationship question and its corresponding answer was then selected for analysis. By the end of the sampling procedure, the researcher had therefore collected a total of 30 magazines and 30 question-and-answer units from this variety of *Drum* magazines.

This research sample was in line with the research objective, which aimed to investigate the nature of black-African magazine advice over different historical time periods. The sample consisted of advice columns from *Drum* magazine as this is the only South African magazine aimed mainly at a black-African readership that contains published relationship-advice columns, and that dates as far back as 1951—although the first advice column to be published in the magazine appeared in September of 1952. The early establishment of this magazine and its advice columns was considered an important feature, as it allowed the researcher an extended time period over which to analyse its content. Moreover, because this magazine is published in English and is a family magazine, it also allowed the researcher the opportunity to analyse advice-column content directed towards both males and females in a language the researcher understood. The decision to sample five random question-and-answer units from five random

magazines within each decade also ensured sufficient coverage of all the time periods being analysed. Free access to this sample of *Drum* magazines and their advice columns was gained through the National Library, situated in Cape Town, South Africa.

### **Data Analysis**

Data sampled from the *Drum* magazine was analysed through the use of thematic analysis, which is a “method used (for) identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). More specifically, theoretical thematic analysis, which allowed the researcher to focus on specific predetermined themes when coding data, was used, although the researcher remained open to the emergence of new themes. In addition, as described by Braun and Clarke, data analysis was conducted at a semantic level, with the researcher progressing from a description of themes to an interpretation of themes, attempting to theorise their significance, broader meaning, and implications.

The data-analysis process was based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step guide to thematic analysis, which involved: 1. *Becoming familiar with the data*: reading and re-reading the randomly sampled information in order to become familiar with its content; 2. *Generating initial codes*: identifying and marking interesting aspects within the sampled data that could potentially form the basis of a predetermined or new theme; 3. *Searching for themes*: sorting the sampled information into predetermined or new themes; 4. *Reviewing themes*: ensuring that data within themes cohere together meaningfully; 5. *Defining and naming themes*: identifying the essence of each theme and giving each theme a name (though this step was skipped in the case of predetermined themes as the essence and name of each theme had already been determined); and 6. *Producing the report*: conducting a final analysis and writing up the academic report.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research project did not include the involvement of any human participants, and all documents reviewed were freely and readily available. Therefore, no direct ethical issues related to this research project needed to be addressed. There was, however, an ethical duty upon the researcher to produce valid and reliable research.

## Results and Discussion

### The Nature of the *Drum* Magazine Sample

A total of 30 *Drum* magazine advice-column question-and-answer units were randomly collected during the sampling procedure. Of this sample, a total of 16 question-and-answer units from female readers, and a total of 14 question-and-answer units from male readers, were gathered. The number of units sampled was therefore more or less equivalent for both male and female readers, which may reflect the magazine's relatively gender-equal distribution of published letters. It may also be useful to mention that while "Dolly" served as the main advice columnist in the *Drum* magazine sample, the advice columnist "Priscilla" answered readers' questions between 1959 and 1965.

The sample of advice columns was examined for the presence or absence of four predetermined themes. By the end of the analysis, it was concluded that all of these predetermined themes were present within the *Drum* magazine sample, although its content did not directly correspond with the content included within Western advice columns. Moreover, some of the predetermined themes within the sample were more prominent than others. They ranked, in order of prominence, as follows: a culture of therapy; the emergence of an open culture towards matters of sexuality; changes in gender expectations; and the open expression of feelings towards undesirable or inappropriate behaviour. Furthermore, since the researcher was open to the possible emergence of new themes during the data-analysis process, two new themes emerged independently from, and in addition to, these four predetermined themes—namely, changing attitudes towards infidelity and its associated risks, and the importance of parents.

### A Culture of Therapy

The development of a culture of therapy was observed to have a quite distinct emergence in the *Drum* magazine. Advice prior to 1999 did not mention counselling or similar forms of therapy as possible solutions or methods of support for readers and their problems. Rather, readers were advised to make use of other forms of help and support during this time. For example, in 1962, a woman wrote to Priscilla saying:

I was asked by my stepfather to marry a certain man when I was in Middle Form One...But I don't love this man. I am afraid to tell my parents that I will not marry

him because they will dismiss me from home. What shall I do? (“Priscilla Asks”, 1962, p. 81)

In response to this letter, Priscilla said, “I suggest you tell your mother ALL that you feel about the man...if you’re afraid to go to your mother directly, find an old friend of hers and use her as a mediator” (p. 81). As can be seen from this example, in the earlier years of the magazine’s advice column, support systems primarily involved family friends, which may have allowed readers to view such friends as vital means of support in the case of familial disputes.

In more recent years, however, advice that tends towards recommending the help of therapists has become more prominent. The first representation of this trend was found in 1999, where a woman who was concerned about having tested positive for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) though she had not been sleeping with anyone other than with her boyfriend was advised, “You should ask your boyfriend to take the test again, and just to be sure you should take the test with him...if you really are positive, both of you will need counselling” (“Dear Dolly”, 1999, p. 38). In this response, counselling is portrayed as something essential and as the only form of valid help. Another example appeared in 2004, when a man wrote to Dolly expressing his misery due to the fact that his girlfriend had become withdrawn and miserable and refused to get close to him physically (“Ask Sis Dolly”, 2004). Dolly replied to the reader saying, “Once she is aware of her conduct and the negative impact it’s having on you, you can suggest relationship counselling, which will help both of you gain insight into your difficulties” (p. 76). Therefore, while readers were advised to approach family friends for support in earlier years, readers were later encouraged, if not required, to seek outside help in the form of counselling. Readers may therefore have come to attribute a lesser degree of importance to the social support of friends, and a higher degree of importance to the support of therapists. Moreover, this response suggests that the reader and his or her partner need to know themselves well in order to live a better life together, as—according to Dolly—gaining this level of insight into their difficulties may help them to resolve their problems.

From the two examples mentioned above, and from the fact that no mention of counselling appeared in advice prior to 1999, it may be deduced that the emergence of a therapeutic culture was a relatively recent development within the *Drum* sample. This development took place around the same time that it took place in Western advice-column material: specifically, towards the late 1990s. However, unlike the case with Western advice

material (Kirkman, 2001), the use of psychological words such as “stress” or “depression” were not at all prominent. This may suggest that the *Drum*’s readership has not yet been as influenced by the professional field of psychology as its Western counterpart, since psychological terms have not yet been used to describe or explain reader behaviour.

### **The Emergence of an Open Culture towards Matters of Sexuality**

It would seem that the 1950s and 1960s were a time in which issues around sexual intercourse and sexuality were considered taboo in nature. This can be observed in the fact that such issues were not mentioned in the advice-column sample during this period of time. Such discussions, however, gradually became more prominent between the 1970s and 2000s. For example, the first direct mention of sexuality appeared in 1972, when a man wrote to Dolly saying, “I asked her to have intercourse and she said it was a rule to wait until you are married before having intercourse” (“Dear Dolly”, 1972, p. 44). Here, the use of the word “intercourse”, rather than “sex”, shows that the reader possessed a modest attitude towards the subject matter at hand. However, Dolly’s response to this letter included the word “sex”, rather than “intercourse”: “She wants you to...wait until you are married to her before expecting sex” (p. 44). Though Dolly may have been more direct in her reference to the act, readers in the 1980s still seemed to show a modest attitude towards mentioning the word. For example, in 1987, a woman wrote to Dolly saying, “I am very worried because I have no knowledge of sleeping with men at all. My request to you Sis Dolly, is that you might assist me with pamphlets on lovemaking...” (“Dear Dolly”, 1987, p. 75). Again, although this choice of words demonstrates modesty, Dolly replied with the following advice: “If you pay a visit to the bookshop...they’ve got a variety of sex books which you can choose from” (p. 75). The 1990s exhibits a similar situation. A man wrote to Dolly saying, “Even when I try hard, I simply can’t get into intercourse [with my girlfriend]” (“Dear Dolly”, 1995, p. 68). Not surprisingly, Dolly responded by saying, “Maybe it’s the way you respond to each other during these sex sessions” (p. 68).

It was not until the year 2002 that the act was first directly referred to as “sexual intercourse” or “sex” by a reader. A letter from a reader in this year stated the following: “Each round of sexual intercourse is a painful experience for me” (“Sis Dolly”, 2002, p. 75). This year was also the first year in which the mention of sexuality was prominent, as the same reader wrote to Dolly expressing her view that “Maybe I’ll be better off resorting to lesbian sex” (p. 75). Dolly responded to this reader saying, “While it is your right to choose sexual partners and how you

want to have it, it will be futile to engage in lesbianship if you don't feel good making love to another woman" (p. 75). Dolly therefore neither encouraged nor rejected the idea of "lesbianship", but rather acknowledged it as a right of choice and preference. Dolly's direct references to sexual relations in earlier years may have later persuaded readers that such mentioning was appropriate, hence the gradual progression from the use of modest to more direct terminology by readers themselves. In addition, Dolly's neutral stance on sexuality may have allowed readers to perceive a personal freedom with regard to their sexual interests and choices, and a sense of acceptance towards their decisions.

According to the literature on Western advice columns (Gudelunas, 2005; Mutongi, 2000), caution about sex existed in the 1940s and 1950s, but started to shift in the 1950s and 1960s. In the present sample of advice columns, this shift seems to have occurred in the 1970s.

### **Changes in Gender Expectations**

It was observed that in earlier years, advice given in the *Drum* magazine portrayed the roles of men and women as highly segregated: men were primarily portrayed as the breadwinners, women as the housekeepers. While this role-segregation remained relatively unaltered for men, the roles of women seemed to change in the 1980s. The portrayed role of men as breadwinners can be observed in a number of cases. In 1952, for instance, a woman who wrote to the magazine asking whether she should ask her boyfriend about marriage, was advised the following:

A girl of 18 cannot marry the first man she meets, and a man, especially a Zulu, must work first and save enough money for Lobolo, and for starting his new home...once you get married and babies are born there must be money to look after them decently. ("Problem Corner", 1952, p. 43)

From this example it can be seen that, in the 1950s, a financial duty to take care of his family was placed upon a husband. It was not Dolly alone who asserted men's obligations regarding financial maintenance, however: it was observed that men themselves also recognised being the breadwinner as their main role during this time. This observation is illustrated by another letter from 1952, in which a man sought reassurance about his capacity to marry, stating that he had his own business and could afford to build a home for his future spouse ("Dolly Gets About", 1952). This portrayal of the role of men remained relatively consistent from the 1950s onwards. In the early 1960s, for example, a man wrote to Priscilla expressing his dilemma, as he had impregnated



another girl while he was still in love with his girlfriend (“Confide In Me”, 1964). Priscilla replied, “Naturally you will have to pay the girl’s confinement costs and see to it that you maintain the child when it is born” (p. 79). Another example appeared in the 1990s, where a woman complained about her husband’s drinking problem and was unsure about whether to leave him or not, as she felt her children would suffer in a broken home (“Dear Dolly”, 1997). The reader was advised, “Make it clear...either he stops drinking and treats you better, or you’ll leave and sue him for the maintenance of your children” (p. 40).

Letters and answers of this nature could have implications on the subjectivities of the vast *Drum* magazine readership. Men, for instance, may have seen it as primarily their duty to provide financial support for their families. They may also have considered financial security to be a primary means by which to assess their readiness for marriage.

During the 1970s, both questions and answers published in the *Drum* magazine advice columns portrayed the role of women as primarily that of a housekeeper. In 1973, for example, a man wrote to Dolly expressing disappointment and dissatisfaction with regard to his wife’s household work (“Dear Dolly”, 1973). He wrote, “Her work around the home is not satisfactory and I even have to tell her to change the baby’s nappy” (p. 32). The publication of such viewpoints and the lack of any publicised disagreement with them in response, as was the case in this example, may have reinforced the idea that women were single-handedly responsible for household chores and for looking after their children. In addition, what this implies for men is that they have no duty to lend a helping hand; rather, they may dictate to their wives, who then need to obey them.

Although females were portrayed this way during this specific period of time, an interest in female education and employment—or independence—was somewhat apparent. This interest and importance attached to female independence was not, however, held by women themselves. Rather, this interest was expressed by men, or by women who were expressing the views of their parents, in their respective letters to the magazine. In 1952, for example, a man wrote to Dolly telling her that he would like to get married after his girlfriend matriculated (“Dear Dolly”, 1952) and, in 1956, a woman stated in a letter that she felt the need to fulfil her duty towards her parents, who were keen for her to have some kind of profession (“Ask Dolly”, 1956). Advice directed towards these two writers was neither in favour nor against the idea of females being educated or employed. A turn can, however, be seen in the 1980s and beyond, when female

readers began to show an explicit interest in being educated. This can be seen in a letter to Dolly in which a woman stated that she and her boyfriend had promised to get married after *they* had completed *their* studies (“Dear Dolly”, 1981). This girl also mentioned that she did not want to marry the man any longer and did not know how to tell him. Dolly advised her the following:

If you are positive about not marrying him, you will have to make up a story; otherwise you will hurt him even more. Tell him that you want to be independent, work and not be tied down, that marriage is something in the future for you.

(p. 71)

Therefore, although advice from Dolly remained indifferent to female education and employment in earlier years, advice during more recent years communicates female independence as important. This shift may have allowed women to believe that education and employment should be their priority and that marriage can act as a barrier towards these achievements. The 1980s can therefore also be viewed as a time in which the importance of being an “individual” was being developed and encouraged, with the advice-column sample coming to focus on the importance of independence.

In comparison to Western advice-column material, the roles of men in the *Drum* magazine did not seem to change on any dramatic level at all. For example, whereas the analysis of Western materials found that men were advised to enter the realm of domesticity as early as the 1890s (Marsh, 1988), men in the black-African advice column sample were not advised to enter—nor observed to have entered—into this realm at all. Therefore, while gender-role segregation has largely diminished in the Western world, there are still indications of such segregation in the *Drum* magazine sample. The *Drum* magazine advice-column readership may therefore still view the separate roles of men and women as a norm. In comparison to Western advice-column material, where women began to enter the realm of employment from the 1980s onwards (Post, 2004), it may be said that the roles of women, as per *Drum* magazine’s advice columns, began to change at a similar point in time. However, while Western advice columns had begun to encourage women’s “domestic disobedience” as early as 1978 (Post, 2004), such encouragement was absent within the *Drum* magazine sample.

In addition to being primarily portrayed as housekeepers in earlier years, women were often encouraged by advice columns in *Drum* magazine to do whatever would make their male partners happy. The 1970s provides one such instance, with a woman sending the following letter

to Dolly: “one thing I have never accepted from him is money. Because I don’t accept his money he says I don’t love him...I’m in love with him and not his money. But he does not understand this” (“Dear Dolly”, 1971, p. 71). In response, Dolly advised the girl, “If taking his money will make him feel happy, do so...I think it best not to make an issue over the matter” (p. 71).

Furthermore, during this decade, men also seemed to demand women’s obedience towards them, while they appeared to disregard women’s personal views. In 1973, for example, a man wrote to Dolly stating:

I am living with a woman...The problem is that this woman has changed and is hell to live with. Her work around the home is not satisfactory...now she is wearing a short dress. I told her never to wear it again and one morning she did just that...I ripped it off her and slapped her but still she was aggressive. I am angry to think that this woman will one day be legally married to me and she won’t obey me. (“Dear Dolly”, 1973, p. 32)

Dolly responded to this letter suggesting that “A husband who rips off his wife’s clothes, slaps her and expects to be ‘obeyed’ just won’t make any woman happy. Perhaps that’s why she rebels...” (p. 32). Although Dolly did not explicitly agree or disagree that the reader’s girlfriend should be obedient towards him, she offered a justification for his girlfriend’s so-called rebellion against his wishes, implying that a woman should, in normal cases, obey their partners, and that men should, in normal cases, expect to be obeyed.

The late 1980s, however, presented a contrasting case in which men and women were encouraged to do whatever made themselves, rather than their partners, happy. A man, for example, wrote to Dolly during this period stating that he felt guilty for causing a rift in his girlfriend’s family as they had chased her away from home because she was in love with him, who was financially poor, and because she had protested against her parents’ wishes for her to go out with other men who were better-off (“Dear Dolly”, 1989). Dolly’s advice to the reader was, “There are times in life where one is compelled to adopt a selfish attitude and put oneself in the forefront. I think this is the time to think of your future happiness and stop being sympathetic to others” (p. 96). In 1997, a similar case was presented, with a woman writing to Dolly complaining about her husband’s behaviour towards her and asked whether she should leave him (“Dear Dolly”, 1997). She was advised the following: “Put yourself first and do what makes you happy” (p. 40). This showed not only a higher consideration for the self and for one’s happiness,

but also a higher consideration for women, since their views, opinions, and decisions began to be portrayed as important as well. Female readers might thereby have come to redefine their obligations as they might have come to view their own sentiments in a higher light. They might have changed their beliefs about obedience, from believing it to be a necessity to believing it to be an atypical or unobligated response to some form of control by their partners.

Issues relating to violence against women often arose in letters to Dolly. These letters seemed to show that men would mainly resort to violence in extreme cases in which their female partners refused to obey them. Over time, a change in advice towards such violence was observed in the *Drum* magazine sample. In 1973, as discussed, a man explicitly mentioned in his letter to Dolly that he had slapped his girlfriend when she refused to obey him (“Dear Dolly”, 1973). Although Dolly’s response to this letter suggested that “a husband who rips off his wife’s clothes, slaps her and expects to be ‘obeyed’ just won’t make any woman happy” (p. 32) and that the reader should “try a little love and tenderness” (p. 32), the wrongfulness of the deed was not clearly brought across. Instead, Dolly seemed to focus on emotion, and the importance of being “happy”. This again shows how the importance of “the self” has been given a higher consideration in more recent years in the advice-column sample. Moreover, in 1975, another man wrote, “I am in love with a doll of 19 who is married to a jealous guy...sometimes when he arrives he hits her all night” (“Dear Dolly”, 1975, p. 50). Dolly’s advice towards this man with regard to the abuse was that “she doesn’t have to allow herself to be assaulted and she should charge him at a police station” (p. 50). This response also only implied, rather than directly asserted, the wrongfulness of abuse against women, and the choice of the words “doesn’t have to” further implied that the woman had a choice about whether or not she would tolerate the violence. Moreover, an absence in advice instructing immediate action against such violence was observed. Where such advice was lacking, and where Dolly only implied that violence against women was wrong, readers may have concluded that the deed was a minor transgression, rather than something that needed to be punished.

A shift seems to have occurred in the 2000s. In 2003, for example, a woman wrote to Dolly expressing her grief about being raped by her boyfriend after she refused to have unprotected sex with him; she contracted HIV as a result of the experience (“Sis Dolly”, 2003). Unlike in earlier years, Dolly responded to this letter with a strong positioning, declaring that “that man deserves to be jailed and removed from society forever...he raped you and that’s an

unforgivable offence. You should have gone straight to the police, but it's not too late" (p. 63). Here, not only did Dolly respond by saying that the woman should have gone straight to the police—which suggests that immediate action be taken in such situations—but she also mentioned rape as a categorically unforgiveable offence, whereas in earlier years, it was left for the victim to decide the outcome of an assaultive relationship. Dolly thereby showed a clear dismissal of acts of violence against women and explicitly acknowledged that such acts warrant legal action. This may have allowed both men and women to view such acts as unjustifiable and morally wrong. It may be supposed that changes in the level of wrongfulness of violence against women are linked to society's changed expectations of these women. For example, because women were expected to be obey their male partners in earlier years, their disobedience may have been viewed as deserving of violent punishment. However, because women are now encouraged to do what makes themselves, rather than others, happy, their personal decisions and behaviours may come to be viewed as deserving of respect rather than punishment. Consequently, violence against women may come to be viewed as an unacceptable and major offence.

When comparing material present within the *Drum* magazine sample to Western advice columns, it seems that changes with regard to the importance of the self occurred at differing times. For example, in Western advice, women were encouraged to seek self-fulfilment after the 1960s (Post, 2004) while, in black-African advice, they were advised to this effect only after the 1980s. While advice directed towards white Westernized women encouraged them to engage in "domestic disobedience" since the 1970s (Brinkgreve & Korzec, 1979), advice directed towards black-African women emphasised their duty to obey their male partners up until the late 1980s. Attitudes towards violence against women seemed to change in the 2000s in the black-African advice-column sample, while these attitudes seemed to change in the 1960s in Western advice columns (Beggan et al., 2000). It may therefore be suggested that violence against women was seen as permissible for a longer period of time within the black-African columns, perhaps because women's disobedience was seen as a punishable act for a longer period of time in *Drum's* advice columns in comparison to Western advice. Moreover, while it was reported that recent Western advice attempted to provide men with a greater knowledge and understanding of women and their actions (Beggan et al., 2000), such advice was apparently absent from the black-

African advice-column material. It therefore does not yet seem that the male readership of the *Drum* magazine has been encouraged to gain such insight into the nature of women.

### **The Open Expression of Feelings towards Undesirable or Inappropriate Behaviour**

It was observed that men and women were encouraged to express their true feelings about their partners' behaviours at different historical time periods in the *Drum* magazine. In 1964, for example, a man wrote to Priscilla asking for advice as he had impregnated a girl without the knowledge of his overseas girlfriend ("Confide In Me", 1964). Priscilla replied to the reader: "What you must do is write to her [the girlfriend] immediately and tell her the truth about what you've done" (p. 79). This trend of men being encouraged to display openness towards their women was also apparent in 2004 when a man wrote to Dolly expressing his misery over the fact that his girlfriend had become withdrawn and miserable and refused to get close to him in a physical manner ("Ask Sis Dolly", 2004). Dolly's reply to this letter included the following: "You need to make her understand how you feel about her behaviour" (p. 76). These two examples show how men were explicitly encouraged to be truthful to their female partners regarding their feelings, as early as the 1960s. This may have allowed men to perceive their personal happiness as vital and to believe that woman should change their behaviours to please them, which may also have accentuated any preexisting feelings of superiority on the side of men.

Women, however, were encouraged in the opposite direction during earlier periods of time. In 1981, for example, a woman wrote to Dolly saying that she had changed her mind about marrying a man she was betrothed to, as she felt he was no longer fit to marry her ("Dear Dolly", 1981). Regardless of the fact that the woman's reasons for feeling this way were unclear, Dolly instructed the girl as follows: "If you are positive about not marrying him, you will have to make up a story [to tell him], otherwise you will hurt him even more [with the truth]" (p. 71). Although women were told to suppress their real feelings towards their male partners in prior years, the late 1990s demonstrates a change in this situation. A woman who wrote to Dolly in 1997, for instance, complained of her boyfriend's cruel behaviour towards her, mentioning that "whenever he's had a few drinks he's quick to pick a fight and accuse me of past mistakes. He also assaults me" ("Dear Dolly", 1997, p. 40). In response to this complaint, Dolly advised the girl thus:

You need to decide whether you're prepared to give him a second chance or not – but if you decide to do so, it has to be on your terms. Make it clear you're not prepared to take his nonsense anymore and set him a deadline; he either stops drinking and treats you better, or you'll leave and sue him for the maintenance of your children. (p. 40)

What can therefore be deduced from these examples is that men were encouraged to express their true feelings in earlier as well as more recent years; women on the other hand were cautioned against expressing their true feelings in earlier years, though this seemed to have changed in more recent years. This may have been in line with the fact that the earlier years were considered a time whereby men should be obeyed. Women's expression of their true feelings about their male partners may therefore have been regarded as disrespectful, hence they were advised to suppress their emotions.

Because women were not encouraged to be honest with their partners, they may have attributed a sense of superiority to their partners' happiness and considered hurting men's feelings as immoral. However, since women are now advised to stand up against their partners' inappropriate behaviours, they may have come to view their own feelings in an equally important light and may thereby have come to recognise their own right to happiness.

While Western advice encouraged women to protest against their partners' inappropriate behaviours by the late 1970s (Brinkgreve & Korzec, 1979), such advice only became prominent in the black-African advice-column sample in the late 1990s. Moreover, it seemed that men were encouraged to be open about their emotions to their female partners from the earliest *Drum* advice-column publication. It may therefore be suggested that the *Drum* magazine sample emphasised male superiority for a longer period of time than Western advice columns did.

### **Changing Attitudes towards Infidelity and its Associated Risks**

Although the analysis of the advice columns in the *Drum* magazine was particularly alert to themes that emerged in such studies elsewhere, one had to remain open to the possibility that different themes could emerge from this study. One such theme to emerge was a change in the attitude attributed to relationship infidelity and its associated risks. It was observed that, in the earlier years of the sampled material, infidelity on the part of a man was treated as a natural occurrence, rather than a deed to be chastised. For example, in 1960, a girl wrote to Priscilla asking for advice about what she should do about her boyfriend who was having affairs, although

she had been dedicated to him and had even stayed with him for some length of time (“Priscilla Asks”, 1960). Priscilla’s response to this reader was as follows:

I must point out that you yourself are responsible for the mess that you are in. Few men can ever have respect for a girl who can stoop so low as to leave her home and stay with him. “Vat en sit” couples seldom, if ever, marry. (p. 77)

Priscilla thereby seemed to direct the blame for the reader’s partner’s infidelity towards the reader herself, while her partner’s inappropriate behaviour was more or less defended. Moreover, the boy’s promiscuous behaviour was not deemed morally wrong; instead, Priscilla’s use of the words “Vat en sit’ couples seldom, if ever, marry” may have allowed men and women to perceive their dedication in relationships as undesirable because, according to Priscilla, the chance of marriage in such instances are minimal, if not non-existent. The wrongfulness of infidelity was also observed to be absent in another letter to Priscilla in 1964, where a man sought advice on what to do given that he had an overseas girlfriend but had impregnated another girl at the same time (“Confide In Me”, 1964). Although Priscilla advised the reader to inform his overseas girlfriend of what he had done, she did not explicitly disapprove of his actions. Rather, she allowed him to decide which girl he truly loved, mentioning that his only duty was to provide for the child after it was born. This neutral stance pertaining to male infidelity may have allowed men an easy escape from their promiscuous behaviours. Men may thereby have ascribed no real sense of wrongfulness or feelings of guilt towards the deed, as a minimal level of dismissal and responsibility (if any) seemed to be ascribed to such behaviour.

These attitudes towards infidelity seemed to change in the 1990s. An example from 1995 depicted this change: a 26-year-old man wrote to Dolly that he had slept with two other girls while he was in a relationship with his current girlfriend, because his sexual desire towards her had declined (“Dear Dolly”, 1995). Dolly mentioned in her response, “I should take you to task for being so naughty at your age, but I won’t, because you already know it’s wrong...Get your house in order or get out rather than sleep around with people you hardly know” (p. 68). Here Dolly explicitly mentioned the wrongfulness of promiscuity, while she also took a stern stance on multiple-partner relationships. Such a stance is also observed in an example from 2003, where a woman wrote to Dolly expressing her partner’s inappropriate behaviours towards her:

The man in my life never told me he was married...two weeks into our relationship we decided to have sex, so I brought along condoms. He got very



cross with me and threw them away. When I refused to have unprotected sex...he then forced himself on me and raped me throughout the night. In the morning he apologized. As we continued our relationship I learnt that he was involved with other women too. (“Sis Dolly”, 2003, p. 63)

In her response, Dolly not only referred to the rape as abuse, but also stated that the reader’s boyfriend abused her love, thereby portraying promiscuity as something improper and cruel. Therefore, while men may have been justified or defended for cheating on their partners in earlier years, the subsequent change in attitude towards infidelity in the advice-column sample may gradually have allowed promiscuous readers to view such behaviour as inappropriate, and may also have instilled in them a greater sense of remorse for engaging in infidelity.

An important aspect on the topic of infidelity that should be accounted for is the risks associated with it. Such risks were first mentioned in 1999, when a woman stated that she had recently been tested HIV-positive (“Dear Dolly”, 1999). Two similar instances appeared in the 2000s, when readers declared their, or their partners’, positive HIV statuses (“Sis Dolly”, 2003; “Sis Dolly”, 2004). In none of the advice given was safe sexual behaviour addressed, unless readers initiated this discussion in their letters to Dolly. Advice published in the *Drum* magazine thus seemed to have overlooked the issue entirely.

### **The Importance of Parents**

Since the earliest years of publication, advice in the *Drum* magazine attributed a great deal of importance to the views held by readers’ parents. This can be seen through a number of examples. In 1952, a man wrote to Dolly stating his intention to marry a girl of 18, as he felt he was able to take care of her financially (“Problem Corner”, 1952). Dolly’s reply to the reader advised, “Talk to her about it and if she wants to marry you, go ahead if you have her parents’ permission” (p.43). Another example appeared in 1956, where a schoolgirl wrote to Dolly saying, “My boyfriend with whom I have been deeply in love for five months is known as a gangster in our district. I find him quite harmless...The trouble is that my parents hate him” (“Ask Dolly”, 1956, p. 33). Dolly replied to this reader saying that “you should...examine carefully the reasons why your parents do not like your boyfriend. Parents are not always wrong, you know” (p.33). Both of these examples illustrate the importance attributed to parents and their views, as well as the inherent duty upon a child to take his parents and their views into consideration.

Dolly seemed to attribute an importance to parents and their views throughout the time period for which advice columns were analysed. In 1974, for example, a woman who wrote to Dolly asking whether she should leave her husband, as his drinking problem had become an issue for her and her child, was advised:

Yes, leave him... But remember, he is the father of your child so when the child is older don't turn him against his father...A child needs to respect his parents so if there is anything good that you can say about the man, say it to his child. ("Dear Dolly", 1974, p. 55)

This picture holds true for the 1990s as well. In 1992, a man wrote to Dolly asking for help since his parents had been forcing him to get married, despite the fact that he did not have the financial means to do so ("Dear Dolly", 1992). In response Dolly said:

Sons and daughters are expected to respect the views of their parents. But what parents fail to realize is that some of us lead unhappy lives because we allowed our parents to make us do things that were obviously not correct for our young futures. You need to explain to your parents that, besides being financially embarrassed, you are also not prepared as yet to settle down. (p. 98)

Therefore, explicit mention of a child's duty to respect his parents' views seemed to be made from the 1950s through to 1990s, although Dolly tried to balance this duty with the more independent stance of modern times, as may be observed in the last example. Advice-column readers may thereby have identified a responsibility on their side to respect their parents and their views, as such a great level importance had been attributed to them.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The construction of subjectivity was investigated through a sample of relationship-advice texts from the popular black-African magazine *Drum* over a period of time. Changes in advice, and therefore in the construction of subjectivity, within this sample were found to reflect the same changes found in white, Western advice columns. Changes with regards to (i) a culture of therapy; (ii) the emergence of an open culture towards matters of sexuality; (iii) gender expectations; and (iv) the open expression of feelings towards undesirable or inappropriate behaviour were found to be prominent within the sample. Two new themes emerged from the *Drum* magazine sample, namely, changing attitudes towards infidelity and its associated risks, and the importance of parents.

There is much to be cautious about when interpreting these themes and their wider implications. The first major issue relates to the selection of the materials to analyse. Since a total of 30 advice columns were systematically selected—on a random basis, the researcher was completely neutral in this selection of material, and this selection was thus done without any bias. However, because such a limited number of advice columns were picked, certain advice columns were used more than once to illustrate the emergence of different themes. This may be problematic as it may seem as if a large edifice has been built around a very limited number of words. However, advice columns are relatively brief in nature as they often deal with a number of very similar questions from different readers. One can therefore be reasonably confident that, were more columns to be selected, the same patterns found in this research project would emerge from the larger selection.

Secondly, since *Drum* magazine is published in English and is targeted towards a black-African readership, it is probable that only educated English-speaking readers write to the magazine. The implications of this project cannot therefore be generalised to the black-African population as a whole, as this readership exists only as a subset of that population. This may, however, be equally regarded as a strength, because it has allowed this sample of advice columns to be reasonably comparable to those advice columns appearing in Western magazines.

This research project looked at a magazine aimed at a black-African population group. The researcher believes that we can learn something through the questions and advice given in this magazine's advice columns about what was referred to earlier as the construction of subjectivity. This means that we can learn about how advice columns may have influenced or informed readers' judgements about themselves, others, and society. It is believed that this has been done through identifying how these advice columns have portrayed the self in relation to others. It is also believed that something was learnt about how black-African people may have changed over time with regard to the influence of these columns. For example, these columns have, in summary, attributed significant importance to self-development, and may have thus allowed its readership to adopt a greater sense of self importance. This was observed through the importance attributed to being independent, "being the real self", being open about one's feelings, being "happy", and gaining a better understanding about oneself.

Although this project analysed advice columns written by black-African readers and responders, it may be beneficial to consider more critically the usefulness of these columns. For

example, do these columns in fact provide us with a means through which we construct our subjectivities? Do they in fact affect people's lives and the way in which we look at ourselves? If this is the case, it may also be useful to further expand the range of advice columns that we analyse, since many analyses have been conducted on advice columns aimed at the Western population, and we now have information on advice columns aimed at a black-African population. Furthermore, it may be useful to question what other sources may be used to investigate the construction of subjectivity, as advice columns may only provide us with one means through which this construction may be investigated.

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