

**The psychologisation of disasters in South African newspaper reports**

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### Abstract

In recent decades the influence of psychology on western societies has become increasingly pervasive, leading to the development of a new field of literature on ‘psychologisation’ and ‘therapy culture’. This field of literature explores the way in which the language and praxis of psychology has extended beyond the therapeutic encounter – permeating everyday life events and individuals’ subjectivities. Literature on the psychologisation of humanitarian aid intimates that the focus of the responses to disaster and war-torn populations has taken a therapeutic turn.

Two blatant gaps in the literature were identified, which the present study aimed to bridge. The first is a paucity of *empirical* research on psychologisation – particularly in relation to the number of theoretical articles on the topic. The second and more blatant gap pertains to research on psychologisation in non-western or semi-westernised nations. In South Africa there are currently only two published articles on psychologisation. Thus using a comparative qualitative approach, this study sought to empirically investigate South African disasters from different time periods as they were reported about in newspaper articles. By doing so, the study addressed the following research question: “In what way have reports on disasters changed over time and how do these changes illustrate psychologisation?” Five disasters were chosen spanning the period from 1969 to 2011. A semi-inductive thematic analysis of the data suggested five interlinking components of psychologisation which were explicated and analysed using extracts from newspaper articles.

## **Introduction**

Since the inception of the field of psychology, its influence on western societies and individuals has become increasingly pervasive. The new psychology-influenced way of life is described as a result of the process of ‘psychologisation’, giving rise to a ‘therapy culture’ or psychotherapeutic attitude to everyday life events. Psychologisation has far reaching implications because it shapes societies, lives and experiences (McLeod & Wright, 2009). Jansz and Van Drunen (2004) explain, psychologisation is intrinsically tied to westernisation. As a result, psychologisation in western societies can be assumed; however, much less is known about psychologisation in non-western or ‘semi-westernised’ nations like South Africa.

In light of the all-pervasive nature of psychologisation and the dearth of literature on this topic in the South African context, this study seeks to explore psychologisation in South Africa. The study will be conducted by investigating the interpretations of and responses to disasters as reported about in newspaper articles. The examination will include newspaper reports spanning from the end of the 1960s – a time where a psychotherapeutic attitude was less prominent in western societies – through the 80s and up until the present decade. By definition, disasters imply life-changing devastation for an individual or social grouping. Thus, disasters are an ideal medium to explore whether the affected population interpreted and responded to devastation, grief and change through the lens of psychology.

In order to detect evidence of psychologisation in newspaper articles on disasters the concept and the way it manifests empirically must first be understood. Accordingly, the first port of call for this study will be to delineate psychologisation by collating the literature thereon. Subsequently, the scope will be narrowed to focus on how psychologisation influences the way tragic events are interpreted and dealt with; providing an important background to the methods and findings of the present study.

## **Psychologisation**

The pervasive influence of psychology on societies and individuals emerged in response to the increasing individualisation of western society (Jansz & Van Drunen, 2009). The individualisation of western society constituted a turn away from an outward communal focus to an inward focus, facilitated by the undermining of religious, familial and political authorities (Lasch, 1991; Pupavac, 2004a; Rief, 1987). The strong convictions that stemmed from these traditional authorities were therefore diminished while the importance and

isolation of the individual increased in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Jansz & Van Drunen, 2009). In this social milieu the psychological became more relevant than ever before. Hence, the context allowed an increase in the authority given to psychological knowledges. Moreover, it encouraged the permeation of a therapeutic discourse that focused on discovering, nurturing, and healing the 'self' (Furedi, 2004).

Rose (1998a) asserts that the authority afforded to psychological knowledges is most profoundly observed in the way that it currently governs subjectivities by impacting on how individuals understand themselves and others. The use of psychological knowledges when comprehending the self is no longer limited to the psychology student or practitioner. Likewise, the salience of individuals as *emotional* subjects is no longer confined to the therapeutic encounter. Instead, psychologisation has brought about a general preoccupation with emotions, which Furedi (2004) contends have increasingly come to constitute an understanding of the self (Furedi, 2004).

Paralleling Furedi and Rose's contentions, De Vos (2012) explains that the prominence of psychology in contemporary western culture (which Furedi labels "therapy culture") has the effect of both proselytising 'excess subjectivity' and circumscribing it by defining "appropriate signifiers and normative models of subjectivity" (De Vos, 2011, p.8).

While one might suspect psychologisation to be most pronounced in the middle to upper classes of western societies (as these classes are more directly exposed to the field of psychology), Silva (2012) contends that the infiltration of therapy culture in a vast array of social institutions instantiates its influence on the subjectivities of those in the working class as well. Her interviews with 93 black and white working class Americans revealed their internalisation of therapy culture as they explained their transition to adulthood using the therapeutic idiom – focusing on developing and healing the self. Similarly, McLeod and Wright's (2009) study of economically and socially marginalised Australian women found that they drew on therapeutic knowledge, discourses and strategies when discussing surviving difficult circumstances. These studies reveal the pervasiveness of psychologisation and suggest that the proximity to western therapy culture is more important than socioeconomic status in determining the influence of psychology.

On the other hand, in non-western countries little is known about whether psychologisation has occurred. In South Africa – a semi-westernised nation – there are currently only two published articles on psychologisation, both of which suggest

psychologisation. Wilbraham (1997) points at the presence of psychologisation by examining South African advice columns. Wilbraham's study (1997) reveals the collusion of South African magazine editors with psychologized ideology, suggesting the possibility that South African editors, including newspaper editors, may function as agents of psychologisation.

Moreover, Moon (2009) postulates the influence of psychology on South Africa's management of the violent legacy of apartheid, a legacy of life-changing devastation. This draws links to the psychologisation of disasters in South Africa because, as Moon (2009) explains, the devastation and grief of Apartheid were dealt with in the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) hearings through a psychotherapeutic lens. The idiom of trauma, closure, denial, repression, healing and truth-telling were all axiomatic of the TRC (Moon, 2009); in fact, Pupavac (2004b) contends that the TRC hearings may have been envisioned as 'mass therapy'. These studies intimate the presence of psychologisation in South Africa and the present study aims to add to their findings.

### **Psychologisation and the rise of trauma**

#### **Interpretations of tragic events**

The increased focus on the emotional self, promulgated by psychologisation, has led to a shift in the manner in which difficult life events are interpreted and dealt with. As the emotional self is made salient, difficult life events are increasingly interpreted in reference to their impact on individuals' mental-health and emotional states (Wright, 2006). Fassin and Rechtman (2009) show how disaster events have increasingly become recognised as 'traumatic', exemplified by the emergence of the diagnosis of PTSD in 1980 (Pupavac, 2004b). This classification and the interpretation of disasters through a "prism of trauma" have transformed the idea of the trauma victim from a marginalised role viewed with suspicion (as seen in the First World War) to a respected and normalised role in modern disasters (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009).

In her article 'Submerging in therapy news,' British journalist Tessa Mayes (2000, p30) argues that news reporting has taken a therapeutic turn which she equates to a "heightened exploration of emotion." She asserts that "emotional indulgence and sentimentalism are replacing informative, facts-based news reporting ... as if reporting and analysing feelings are the reporter's chief purpose" (Mayes, 2000, p30-31)

Responding to Mayes' (2000) article on 'therapy news,' and Furedi's (2004, p.44) assertion that in the West "individual emotions and experience have acquired an unprecedented significance," Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen (2007) conducted an analysis of newspaper reports on British disasters from 1929 to 1999. They concluded that therapy news is not a new occurrence, but rather a "sustained genre of journalism" present in all the disasters they studied. Yet, their analysis has no comparative component. They do not look at how the focus of reports of disasters has changed over time but rather search for similarities – irrespective of whether some aspect of reporting was overwhelmingly common in 1929 and sparse in 1999. However, the process of psychologisation has been around since the field's inception and thus it is unlikely that Furedi himself would dispute that therapy news has been around for a long time. The point is not its existence, but its presence, its pervasiveness.

### **Responses to tragic events**

In conjunction with the shift in the perception of disaster-stricken populations is a dramatic change in what interventions are viewed as necessary to deal with traumatic events – as has already been touched on with the example of the TRC (Moon, 2009). The literature on the provision of international humanitarian aid suggests that the psychological interventions and resources for war and disaster stricken populations may in some instances even dominate the provision of resources for those populations' immediate physical needs (Pupavac, 2004b). De Vos (2011) explains that in the Red Cross, psychosocial support permeates all activities as, for example, even first aiders are taught to "treat the wounded, not only the wound" (IFRC as cited in De Vos, 2011, p.2). Moreover, Fassin and Rechtman's (2009) study of the French AZF chemical factory explosion in 2001 revealed that the emphasis of the response to this disaster was on the provision of psychological support. Similarly, after the September 11 terrorist attacks, approximately nine thousand mental health practitioners participated in offering psychological support to witnesses, survivors and local residents (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009).

The examples drawn on in these reports provide compelling evidence of psychologisation; however, their findings and theoretical conclusions are limited by their lack of comparative evidence. Hardly any of the studies demonstrate psychologisation by means of comparing like sources on similar events from times past where therapy culture is assumed to be less evident. The field of literature is overwhelmingly *theoretical* and there is a major dearth of empirical studies. Moreover, the vast majority of the literature on psychologisation

has been conducted in western societies or on interventions provided by western countries. The substantial effect of psychologisation on shaping societies and individuals' subjectivities intimates the importance of new literature addressing these gaps in the literature.

### **Aims**

This study aims to address the gaps in the literature by using a comparative design to investigate psychologisation in South Africa. Using a qualitative research design, psychologisation will be explored by looking at the progressive changes in newspaper articles that report on disasters.

The study has an **inter-** and **intra-**comparative duality. The inter-comparative aspect deals with the comparison between different newspaper reports, from different time periods, that report on *different* disasters. The intra-comparative aspect deals with the comparison between different newspaper reports, from different time periods, that report on the *same* disaster (such as commemoration articles written years after the event).

By comparing the articles of disasters from different periods of time, this study will explore the following research question.

“In what way have reports on disasters changed over time and how do these changes illustrate psychologisation?”

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study has a historical dimension because comparisons between different time-based contexts are made. Within these contexts the extent of psychologisation is posited as contingent on other socio-historical factors. That is, the psychologisation of a given society cannot be viewed as independent of, or exclusive to, the elements which constitute that society or context (Rose, 1998b). In line with the ontological perspective of the relationship between psychology and society in different historical contexts, the theoretical framework foundational to this project is a critical-historical perspective formulated by Nikolas Rose (1998b). In his book *Inventing our selves: Psychology, power and personhood* Rose (1998b) delineates a critical-historical approach which he posits should be employed when looking at the role of psychology in contemporary realities. Rose (1998b) explains that reality, society and psychology cannot be viewed as separate entities as they exist in a relationship of mutual

constituency. The acknowledgement of this mutual constituency is the hallmark of Rose's (1998b) critical-historical approach.

This approach rejects the notion of contemporary reality as axiomatic truth, positioning reality as an object of enquiry, allowing for an investigation into the relationship between realities, societies and psychology. Rose's (1998b) approach is well suited to this study as it draws attention to the way that realities depicted in newspaper reports are constitutive of a wider socio-political context. That is because this approach draws attention to the way in which these realities have been constructed as a result of specific historical conditions.

Moreover, Rose's (1998b) position posits the importance of understanding meaning *in context*, marking the content and language of texts as contingent on their historical and cultural context. Thus, newspaper reports depict certain 'realities' of disaster management which must be viewed as contingent upon, and existing in a relationship with, the society and presence of psychology within those societies.

## **Design and Data Corpus**

### **Disasters**

The study includes natural and man-made disasters. Only disasters which incurred a minimum of nine deaths were included. This constraint ensures that the disaster would have had an effect on, at the very least, several families and would attract enough newspaper coverage. Disasters were chosen purposively as follows:

#### **Race.**

Disasters which predominantly affected South Africa's white population were over-represented in the sample for two reasons. Firstly, in order to sustain the time-comparative dimension of the study, disasters which occurred during apartheid needed to be included. During apartheid the mainstream press was mostly owned, edited and written by white people (Switzer, 1997). Newspaper reports of disasters affecting oppressed races were mostly written by the oppressors and only a very small and haphazard alternative 'non-white' press existed to offer race-local reportage. In order to obtain a dataset on older disasters substantial enough to allow for valid comparisons to more modern disasters, choosing disasters predominantly affecting the white population emerged as a strong option. The limited scope and required



brevity of this study precluded a comparative investigation of psychologisation across a wider readership; which is a limitation of this investigation.

The second reason accords with the link that was established between psychologisation and westernisation. Because little is known about psychologisation in South Africa, the population that is the most westernised (the white population) offers a good starting point for this nascent field of literature.

Nevertheless, two disasters (one older and one more modern) affecting the coloured population were included to explore, albeit rather cursorily, possible differences with what has been reported in the selected disasters.

### **Time period.**

The time period selected was from the 1960s until present day in order to single out psychologisation. While the process of psychologisation has been on-going since the inception of the field of psychology, the literature suggests that it has occurred most rapidly over the last few decades – and thus it is within the last few decades that a ‘therapy culture’ has become visible and increasingly hegemonic (De Vos, 2011; Furedi, 2004). In 2012 (p.3) De Vos exclaimed, “Just consider that it is only today that psychologisation seems to have reached its height.” Accordingly, disasters occurring as recently as possible (from 2010 onward) were chosen for the most modern cases. Disasters were also chosen from the 1980s as this is the period of time where the influence of therapy culture on humanitarian aid begins being seen in the international literature – with the advent of the diagnosis of PTSD in 1980 and the first planned psychosocial international humanitarian aid response in 1989 (De Vos, 2012; Fassin, 2008). The 1960s were decided as the cut off point for the oldest disasters to ensure that society wasn’t so different that the results would be confounded.

### **Characteristics of disasters and reportage.**

Disasters which engendered either overly political or overly conspiratorial responses or reportage were excluded. For example, while the Helderberg plane disaster of 1987 predominantly affected a white population and resulted in a substantial amount of deaths (159) (Abbas, 2014), the question of ‘what went wrong’ is so prominent in the press that it overshadows reportage interpreting the effects of the disaster on the affected population and how the population dealt with the event. The same applies to the May Day/Bethlehem bus

disaster of 2003 (Ndaba, 2003). Because the individuals who died were trade unionists on their way to a rally, the reportage is predominantly politically focused.

### **Availability.**

There were not many disasters which fit the inclusion criteria and accordingly availability influenced disaster choice.

## **Cases**

***Boland earth tremor.*** Late on the evening of the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 1969 a violent tremor shook the Boland area of the Western Cape (Page, 1976). Almost all the Boland homes (the majority of which were owned by white and coloured inhabitants) were damaged, most beyond repair. Nine coloured people (mostly children) died (Page, 1976).

***Laingsburg flood.*** On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1981 a massive flood caused the destruction of most of Laingsburg and the death of 104 people – almost all white. Most bodies were never found (Wrottesley, 1981).

***Westdene bus disaster.*** On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1985 in Westdene, 42 white children drowned in a school-bus. The driver of the bus lost control while crossing the Westdene dam bridge and plummeted into the dam (Botha, 1999).

***Tzaneen plane crash.*** On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2011 two small aircrafts, flying in low visibility, crashed into a cliff on their way from Tzaneen to Johannesburg. 11 white passengers were killed, including both pilots. (Du Plessis & Prince, 2011).

***Rheenendal bus disaster.*** On the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2011, 14 coloured Rheenendal Primary school children, and a driver, died when their school bus crashed into a river just outside of Knysna. Another 44 children sustained injuries (Oelofse & Oelofs 2011).

## **Newspaper articles**

Newspaper articles provided a good source for investigating psychologisation because a consistent large body of newspaper articles is available for the time span under investigation, enabling systematic time-based comparisons to be made.

Furthermore, newspapers provide a primary view of the scene of the disaster event, reporting on:

- (a) the series of events which transpired
- (b) the atmosphere at the event
- (c) the people involved and their responses
- (d) the way the event was dealt with and spoken about.

As a result, newspaper articles present a version of reality influenced by the context in which the disaster occurred; that is, not only the *direct context* in which the disaster occurred (for example, the community affected), but also a *broader socio-political context* which influences journalists and newspaper editors.

From a realist perspective the fact that the reality portrayed in newspaper articles is influenced by more than the immediate context may be perceived as a limitation of newspaper reports. However, because this project is guided by a critical-historical framework, supposed objective realities are not the object of study. In fact, a contextualist epistemology posits that there is no specific objective reality which could be reported but rather, multiple contextually dependent versions of reality. As such, newspaper articles will allow for an analysis of how realities and meaning are constructed and written about.

What is more, because newspaper articles don't only provide data about the event itself but also situate the event within a historical socio-political context (Van Dijk, 1996), they provide an enriched source for the investigation of psychologisation. Pantti and Jorgensen (2007, p8-9) go as far as to say that “historicising journalistic practices” is crucial to identifying how discourses have changed and remained the same.

### **Article collection: Scope and sampling.**

For all disasters besides the Boland earth tremor, newspaper articles were collected via the online database *SA Media*<sup>1</sup>. Since 1978, this database has digitised newspaper articles on a wide range of topics from almost all of South Africa’s mainstream press, and some of the alternative press. Using *SA Media* allowed for an expeditious retrieval of a large amount of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the database see: <http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za/>

newspaper articles, N=605 (all articles on the disasters digitised from the event until the date of data collection from a wide array of South African newspapers). See appendix for a list of the newspapers included.

Because the Boland earthquake occurred before the database was established, newspaper articles were retrieved manually via micro-film from the Cape Times and Cape Argus for a two month duration after the disaster occurred. In addition to Cape Times and Cape Argus articles written in the first two months after the disaster, all articles on the Boland earthquake written after 1978 (across all newspapers) and digitised on *SA Media* were also retrieved.

The Cape Times and Cape Argus were selected for the Boland disaster sample because of: their appropriate regional focus, both are major South African newspapers which have been in continuous press for the period covered in the study and both are daily papers – allowing the scope for wider and more detailed coverage.

Including coverage from a wider range of newspapers for the Boland dataset was not viewed as necessary because the Cape Times and Cape Argus appeared to be representative of the central tendencies of all of the mainstream newspapers included for other disasters. Moreover, no major differences in reportage across all of the newspapers included in the study were identified. Instead, the content and tone of the newspapers included in the study were very similar; most likely because the majority of the articles included derived from the mainstream press.

Because a close analysis of subtle differences in rhetoric and discourse were important to the study, and Afrikaans is not the primary researcher's first language, Afrikaans newspaper articles were excluded from the sample. This is a limitation of the study as it is unknown as to whether Afrikaans newspapers may have provided alternative perspectives; this question is left open for future research.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected for this study was analysed by means of a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis allows an identification and analysis of patterns (themes) in the data. Themes may then be used and interpreted in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are several reasons why a thematic analysis was appropriate for this study. Firstly, it permits both inductive and deductive ('theoretical') analyses. The literature review offered a framework for understanding manifestations of psychologisation at disaster

sites and in journalistic practices. However, as there is a dearth of research on psychologisation in South Africa, and for the aim of further developing the literature on the psychologisation of disasters, data was analysed semi-inductively. Thus the analysis was guided by general ideas of psychologisation, but allowed for new themes and manifestations of psychologisation to be identified.

Secondly, thematic analysis is commensurate with a range of theoretical frameworks and allows the researcher's epistemological approach to determine the level at which the data is coded. Using a critical-historical framework, the data was viewed as a presentation of a reality to be interrogated. Accordingly, data was coded at the latent level. At the latent level of coding, the semantic content of the data is seen as being shaped and moulded by underlying ideas, concepts and ideologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Finally, thematic analysis is a proficient technique for organising, summarising and understanding large quantities of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding semi-inductively at the latent level allowed for a complex analysis of over 600 newspaper articles.

### **Ethics**

As this work is archival and does not involve any human participants, ethical approval was not necessary.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Upon analysis, the data showed a marked presence of psychologisation. Five aspects of the process of psychologisation emerged from the thematic analysis.

These were:

1. A shift in the interpretation of disasters: the rise of trauma discourse
2. An increase in the focus on emotions
3. A decline in the focus on fortitude, determination and positivity
4. A more pervasive presence of psychological discourses
5. An increase in psychological interventions

#### **1. A shift in the interpretation of disasters: the rise of trauma discourse**

The rise of the trauma discourse is documented by the increased frequency of the term in newspaper reports. The term 'trauma' was absent in articles written before the 21<sup>st</sup> century about the Boland earth tremor (1969). In newspaper articles written about the Laingsburg flood<sup>2</sup> (1981), in the first few years after the flood, there was only a single occurrence of the word. On the other hand, 21<sup>st</sup> century disaster reports (about the Laingsburg, Westdene, Rheenendal and Tzaneen disasters) are peppered with the term 'trauma'. The following examples from the Tzaneen disaster are typical of this occurrence:

- (a) *“The friend said the couple were battling to deal with the trauma of the deaths and had not yet told their youngest son.”* (Du Plessis & Prince, 2011a)
- (b) *At Rand Airport...where a trauma centre had been established...emotions ran high. ... Media reports incorrectly naming passengers led to further trauma yesterday.* (Du Plessis & Prince, 2011b)

The above extracts point to the permeation of a trauma discourse in the public imagination as it is not only the newspaper reporters who interpret the disasters through a “prism of trauma”(extract b) (Furedi, 2004: 127), but so do the disaster victims<sup>3</sup> who directly experienced the 'trauma' (extract a).

The increasingly frequent portrayal of disasters as traumatic since the end of the 1980s contrasts the discursive practices of older newspaper articles in which disasters were described as ‘tragic’, ‘shocking’ or ‘horrific’. Moreover, the increased usage of trauma discourse in 21<sup>st</sup> century articles accords with the time-based component of Fassin and Rechtman’s (2009) findings – namely, that the ‘rise of the trauma’ occurred after the 1980s.

Accordingly, the shift in the perception of disasters is most glaring when juxtaposing early newspaper articles on the Westdene and Laingsburg disasters with their 21<sup>st</sup> century counterparts. For example: while an article in the Rand Daily Mail in 1985 described the disaster as “an extremely tragic accident” (Freimond, 1985) in 2000 the disaster was described as “a traumatic event” (Smith, 2000, p.5). This shift in the discourse, which is reflected across the entire dataset, is emblematic of the contemporary emphasis and legitimization of the emotional strain triggered by disasters. Furedi (2004) goes as far as to

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<sup>2</sup> “traumatic violence of the flood” (Wrottesley, 1983, p.9)

<sup>3</sup> The broader definition of ‘disaster victim’ was employed in this paper – including any individuals who were involved in the event, or who were primarily affected by the event, such as family and friends of deceased disaster victims.

argue that the 'reinterpretation' of victims past experiences as 'traumatic' is one of the most profound demonstrations of the effect of psychologisation in understanding life events.

De Vos (2012) explains that the description of a disaster as traumatic highlights a contemporary, psychologised proclivity to draw attention to the way that difficult life events impact on the *psyche* of individuals. Rather than focusing on the physical damage brought on by disasters, Furedi (2004) explains that the suffusion of the therapeutic ethos has placed precedence on the mental consequences of disasters. The increased focus on the *psychological* disaster victim is best captured in the following extract from an article titled “Cop Sues Over Work Stress”:

*An unemployed former policeman who is suffering from PTSD, as the result of “horrific experiences” he was exposed to during his years of service is claiming more than R200 000 in damages from an insurance company. [The policeman, Mr Bekker,] claimed in court papers that his trauma started when he was exposed to the flood disaster in Laingsburg... Mr Bekker noted to psychologists that he developed problems with sleeping, nightmares and irritability. He is very depressed and has suicidal tendencies, he said. (Venter, 1998, p.5)*

This extract shows a use of the word 'trauma' that differs from the colloquial use of the word observed in the previous extracts. In this article 'trauma' is the primary symptom and description of the onset of PTSD. The acknowledgement and legitimisation of the role of the trauma victim is made explicit by the permeation of the concept of 'trauma' within the workplace and even insurance policies, for which the idea of the trauma victim is a legitimate role requiring compensation. Moreover, the extract delineates the manner in which the exposure to “horrific experiences” has implications for an individual’s psyche – highlighting the salience of the emotional psychological self: as Mr Bekker links his depression, irritability and suicidal tendencies to his traumatic experiences.

## **2. An increase in the focus on emotions**

The psychologised interpretation of disasters as 'traumatic' – and thus, as impacting on individuals’ psyches – intimates a proclivity to view the individual as an emotional, subjective being. It is unsurprising then, that with the rise of trauma there was an increase in the focus of articles on emotions and individuals’ subjective experiences of disasters. Furedi

(2004) identifies this focus as the very bedrock of the therapeutic ethos. In fact, Mayes (2000, p.34) suggests that a primary reason for modern “emotion-centric” reporting is the demand from readers for “emotional style and content.”

Across the entire 21<sup>st</sup> century portion of the dataset, there is a substantially larger focus on emotion than in earlier articles. It is with reports on the Rheenendal bus accident and Tzaneen plane disaster in particular, both occurring in 2011, that human emotion most frequently took centre stage. The following extract from an article written about the funeral for the Rheenendal bus victims is exemplary of the way that the reportage of this disaster exposed and centred on emotion.

*Lugan’s aunt, Sybil Mello, starts crying, “My kinders, my kinders (my children, my children)” when she sees the coffins...*

*Both mothers lean on the coffins, weeping hoarsely and touching the faces of their dead children.*

*...as furniture was moved out of their living room to make room for the coffins they started weeping and trembling. When the coffins were brought inside... the mothers broke down. Family members sobbed and wailed as the coffins were opened. Some rushed to get sugar water to calm the children’s distraught grandparents.*

*When Jocelyn Mello saw her son’s open coffin, she collapsed. Relatives had to support her to help her to his coffin. Sybill Mello wept and sat, her head bowed, between her son’s and daughter’s coffins.*

*... They cried throughout the proceedings. (Dolley, 2011, p.1)*

This extract and the rest of the article, titled “Trauma and tears”, is a descriptive piece about the emotional experiences of two mothers. The inclusion of information about what occurred at the funeral is moulded around the mothers’ emotional reactions which are the focus of the article. Mayes (2000, p.30) wryly comments that the provision of facts in contemporary newspaper reports is being “sidelined,...ignored, or re-defined” because “including the latest *feelings* about events are increasingly what counts as The News.”

Moreover, in other newspaper reports on disasters written in the twenty-first century, even the use of the word ‘emotion’ is abundant, irrespective of the focus of the article. In contrast, in reports written before the mid-to-late-‘80s the term is rarely found. In contemporary newspaper reports the salience of the emotional experiences of disaster victims



is dramatically different from earlier reports which emphasised the converse, reaffirming disaster victims' ability to be stoic, leave the past behind and move on.

The contemporary salience of the emotional subject is explicit in the contrast between newspaper reports written soon after the Laingsburg and Westdene disasters and those written two decades later. It is only in the latter reports that the emotional states of these disaster victims are commonly mentioned, and focused on. This offers greater weight when one considers that, at the stage of writing, substantial time had transpired since the disasters and one would think that the emotional wounds would be less raw.

It is also important to acknowledge the fact that the reportage on the Rheenendal bus disaster, which predominantly implicated coloured disaster victims, did not divert from any of the central tendencies found in the thematic analysis. This reveals the importance of future research foregrounding race in South Africa.

### **3. A decline in fortitude, determination and positivity**

#### *A decline in fortitude and determination.*

In conjunction with the rise of the trauma discourse and the salience of the emotional subject, there was a marked decline in reportage, after the late-80s, about disaster victims' fortitude and determination.

A blatant difference in the articles written before the mid-to-late-80s was their focus on human strength in the aftermath of a disaster. This characteristic is best exemplified by the following extract from an article on the Laingsburg flood:

*Precisely one month after the flood that nearly destroyed it, the little Karoo town of Laingsburg is a little like a sinewy bantamweight boxer who has been all but knocked out – dizzy and dazed but not finished by a long shot, and fighting to get back on his feet. ... Every time the Mayor of Laingsburg, Mr Jan Ellis, looks out the window of his office in Van Riebeeck Street he sees the ruins. But he does not stare for long. Neither he nor the town clerk, Mr N A Mans, have got time for that. (Laingsburg dizzy and dazed, 1981, p.13).*

By personifying Laingsburg as an underdog boxer that refuses to throw in the towel and illustrating this 'fighting spirit' by referring to an ability to be forward-focused, this

extract is a paradigmatic portrayal of fortitude and determination. In a similar way, a large portion of articles that were written before the late-80s that reported on the Boland, Laingsburg and Westdene disasters, emphasised courage, fortitude and the determination to go on. The following newspaper headlines and extracts evidence the focus on fortitude and determination:

Headlines:

- (a) "Sadness but no tears in Tulbagh" (1969, p.3)
- (b) "The courage of the Boland" (1969, p.2)
- (c) "Ceres looks ahead" (1969, p.5)
- (d) "Laingsburg's brave new face" (1984, p.9)
- (e) "In army tents, dust storms, boiling sun Laingsburg soldiers on" (1981, p.8)

Extracts: Referring to the Boland disaster:

- (a) *...with typical Boland fortitude... In every street it was obvious that Tulbagh people were not going to give up. They were determined that life would go on...* (Sadness but no tears, 1969, p.3)
- (b) *...the people of Tulbagh remained defiant* (Geyser, 1969, p.1)
- (c) *[of a resident] Her pluck, her determination, that life must go on as usual, her hospitality, her gratitude are completely typical of all the earthquake victims. [Quoting a resident:] "We must live. We cannot go and sit and cry."* (Bowers, 1969, p.1)

Referring to the Laingsburg flood:

- (d) *Another interesting aspect which struck me when scenes of the devastation were shown on TV was the strange calm and stoicism with which the townsfolk endured the terrifying ordeal.* (Barrow, 1981, p.7)
- (b) "I lost a grandson, but that was God's will," she shrugs: "Life must go on" (Cohen, 1981, p.12)

The above extracts and headlines typify the prevailing discourse of pre-late-80s disaster reportage which emphasised the disaster victims' courage and determination. Moreover, the interpellation of disaster victims as courageous, stoic and determined is not

only implicit in the content and focus of the reports, but it was frequently made explicit as well.

Several of the extracts above appear to equate stoicism and courage; in fact in early newspaper articles references to courage, stoicism and determination are interwoven in a way that suggests their mutual constituency in the public imagination. It appears that at the time of the publication of these articles, courage was paired with the maintenance of composure, the tempering of emotions as well as a focus on moving forward.

The disconnection between courage/determination and emotions is demonstrated in extract (c) where a resident of Laingsburg claims “We must live. We cannot go and sit and cry” – as if the latter (expressing emotions of loss) curtails the former (living – and moving forward). Likewise, headline (a) “Sadness but no tears in Tulbagh,” the headline of an article centred on the fortitude and determination of the people of Tulbagh (from which extract (a) derived), typifies the sentiment toward emotion present in most early newspaper articles. That is, being able to occasionally acknowledge that emotions are present, but being unprepared to focus on them and attempting to marginalise them in favour of a forward-focused outlook. This headline and its corresponding extract (extract (a)) also demonstrate the imperative disconnection between emotional expression and the courage and determination to move forward. Moreover, the idiom “soldiers on” in headline (e) is a metaphorically apt description of the image of the disaster victims evoked by the above extracts and headlines. The victims portrayed are “brave” (cf headline (d)), “defiant” (cf extract (b)), forward-focussed and devoid of emotional expression.

In early newspaper reports fortitude, stoicism and determination are not only referred to and focused on, but are also lauded, as demonstrated by the following extracts:

(a) Quoting the president of the time, Dr Malan, after touring the Boland: *“I am also particularly impressed by the determination of the communities to recover from the effects of the disaster and their will to return to normal life.”*(Malan to aid quake towns, 1981, p.3)

(b) *Other communities, too, are making a valiant effort to forget the tragedies of the earthquake.* (Light relief, 1969, p17)

(c) Quoting the Archbishop of the time: *“I would like to pay tribute to the courage with which the community at Ceres, Tulbagh and Wolseley has accepted this tribulation.”* (Courage of the Boland, 1969, p.2)

(d) From an article with the headline “People of Karoo are inspirational – Munnik:”  
*In a statement to the house [the minister of health, Dr. Munnik] said Laingsburg was hardest hit but with determination and confidence in the future, the community had already begun to organise themselves with a will to rebuild.* (1981, p.8)

From an article on the Westdene disaster, quoting the president at the time, PW Botha:  
 (e) *“Courage and valour are among those fine human qualities without which no society will survive.”* (Jaroscheck, 1985, p.1)

By virtue of the commendation of courage and determination (explicit in these extracts) an implicit praise of stoicism is understood. Moreover, extract (b) reveals that it is not only being forward-focused and determined to continue which is lauded, but being able to do so by attempting to ‘forget’ the tragedies of the past – an endeavour which is described as “valiant.” This popular idea of maintaining emotional composure, trying to forget the past and only looking ahead is not only scant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century portion of the dataset, but completely at odds with the content of 21<sup>st</sup> century disaster reports. For example, let us consider just two extracts from newspaper articles that are about dealing with disasters written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

(a) An emergency worker who was involved at the scene of the Westdene disaster (1985) states in an article written in 2004: *“In the past, the attitude was ‘get on with it’ and the idea of post-traumatic stress was seen as fancy talk. The guys would be too scared to tell their seniors that they weren’t coping. But now handling the effects of trauma has become part of emergency work.”* (Ancer, 2004, p.10)

(b) A survivor of the Westdene bus disaster, Du Plessis, says, *“There are a lot of people who have not dealt with it [the disaster]. I have dealt with it very well – I did not keep it in.”* (Davie, 2006, p.6)

The first extract alludes to and directly addresses the stoic, forward-focused position that is so prominent in early reports. The emergency worker explains that “handling the effects of trauma” is ‘now’ (at the time of writing in 2004) central to emergency work. In other words, acknowledging and dealing with emotions attached to memories of a disaster, rather than ‘trying to forget’ the disaster and only looking ahead. Moreover, while the commended way of ‘dealing with’ the aftermath of the Boland and Laingsburg disasters was

to repudiate negative emotions and attempt to forget the disaster, in 2006 a survivor of the Westdene bus disaster claims that she dealt with the disaster in a commendable fashion by doing the converse - by “not keeping it in.” In other words, by allowing herself to experience and express her feelings and thoughts related to the event.

The more recent extracts suggest a shift in what are considered to be important ideals and values in the aftermath of a disaster – from valuing fortitude to valuing emotional subjectivities. In summation, a decline in fortitude, determination and stoicism co-occurred with the rise of emotional subjectivity. Furthermore, the link observed between stoicism and courage/determination could be seen as a reason why the rise of emotional expression came at the expense of courage and determination (in the reportage on disasters). Because the rise of emotional expression has been shown to be an aspect of psychologisation the data suggests that psychologisation entails a decline in the focus on courage and determination. This finding parallels the assertions of Furedi (2004) – that the hegemony of therapy culture in the western world comes at the expense of traditional ideals such as stoicism, fortitude and reticence.

#### **A decline in positivity.**

Along with the decline in courage and determination there was a decline in the positive outlook of disaster victims as well as the reportage thereon. In pre-late-80s reports, there were frequent attempts to look for the positive in a negative situation. A common manifestation of this outlook was to acknowledge the fact that far more damage and a greater loss of life could have occurred. This had the effect of shifting the focus of the disaster from what damage had been done, to how things could have been worse. And in turn, repudiating the disaster victim's ‘victim role’ and repositioning them as being ‘spared’ from greater destruction. For example:

(a) Relating to the Westdene disaster: *A spokesman for the office of the State President said yesterday that Mr Botha was “greatly distressed by this terrible loss of young lives, but at the same time relieved that not all were lost”* (Jaroscheck, 1985, p.1)

Positivity also took the form of choosing to look for the good in the bad:

(b) Relating to the Boland earth tremor: *“There is a wonderful spirit of cooperation among the people. We are like one big family – we have all been through it and it brought us closer together.”* (Boland women face new life, 1969, p.2)

And in doing so, finding hope for the future:

(e) *Before the flood [the mayor of Laingsburg] had 25 beautiful rosebushes, all of which were destroyed. But a day or two ago he went back to the ruins of his house and found a tiny rosebud. To him it was a symbol of renewal amid the devastation, and when it opens he will pick it and present it to his wife. 4 CT: 27Feb dizzy and dazed but not finished:*

The frequency of such messages of positivity declined steeply in 21<sup>st</sup> century reports; suggesting a possible negative consequence of a contemporary psychotherapeutic attitude to disaster events.

#### **4. A more pervasive presence of psychological discourses**

There is a clear progression of the inclusion of psychological discourses and knowledge in the dataset. While there was little use of psychological jargon in newspaper reports before the late-80s, thereafter its inclusion and use in interpretations of the effects of disasters rose steadily. Psychological knowledge and language in newspaper articles is used by psychologists, lay people who had been interviewed and authors. This finding supports three tenets of psychologisation. Firstly, it reveals that in recent decades psychologists are more commonly drawn on as a source of information for articles. Secondly, by doing so, it suggests the permeation of therapy culture in the broader society in which these newspapers are published because newspapers are influenced by their socio-political contexts and are written for their target markets (Van Dijk, 1996). And thirdly, it reveals the suffusion of psychological language and ideas in the collective consciousness – as authors and lay people more frequently draw on psychological discourses.

Congruent with the contemporary hegemonic interpretation of disasters as traumatic, there was an increased focus on dealing with the psychological effects of the disaster. The therapeutic concepts of coping and closure featured regularly in contemporary articles – including more recent reports on the Laingsburg and Westdene disasters. In fact, according

with Linenthal's (2001) study on the impact of the Oklahoma bombing, the unspoken message underwritten in these texts is that the grieving process "should proceed along the lines dictated by therapeutic knowledge" (Furedi, 2004: p.2).

### **The discourse of coping.**

Two articles that focused on coping with disasters are especially poignant in their exposure of the integration of psychological expertise in the reports about disasters. In the first, headlined "Jokes as coping mechanism, not signs of a sick society," and written in 2001, the author talks about how people use humour to cope, and mentions Westdene as an example of this occurrence (Gifford, 2001, p.7). The author draws on information from psychologists to corroborate her contentions:

*Clinical psychologists agree that humour and jokes are among the coping mechanisms people use to deal with tragedy. ... [quoting a clinical psychologist:] "People use jokes and humour to dissociate or distance themselves from a disaster."*

In this extract psychological concepts ("coping mechanisms", "dissociation") are used to analyse the use of humour after a disaster. The use of psychological concepts in an ordinary newspaper article assumes the public's familiarity with (and perhaps their interest in) psychological knowledge. The fact that a professional psychologist is interviewed for an article about the use of humour in the face of adversity is emblematic of the increased authority afforded to psychological expertise in contemporary society (De Vos, 2012). Moreover, the article provides exemplary evidence of the application of psychological knowledges in everyday life because it shows the application of psychological knowledge, discourse and professional advice to a part of daily life that is usually not considered in the ambit of psychology – that is, jokes.

The second article focuses on the implications of *ineffective* coping strategies and the dangers of not dealing with trauma. Quotations from psychologists who were interviewed are included once again:

*Emergency workers... go from trauma to trauma as part of their daily lives. How do emergency workers cope with these gruesome discoveries? "Not very well," explained*

*Jenny Beechey, a psychologist with the Independent Counselling and Advisory Service (Icas), who are involved with supportive counselling for paramedics. “Many paramedics are faced with ongoing traumatic stress, which can have severe consequences. ...They suffer the effects of what they see and this manifests in relationship problems or substance abuse and can lead to burnout and suicide. When they close their eyes they have flashbacks of the horrific things they’ve seen.” Beechey said many emergency workers were constrained by a macho attitude that prevented them from seeking help. “They need to look at more effective coping skills, how to access support, deal with stress and find positive outlets to vent their frustration.” Clinical psychologist Ruth Lauren said all emergency organisations should offer trauma debriefing and counselling services. “Ignoring experiences of trauma could have a long-term detrimental impact on the person and their families,” she warned. (Ancer, 2004, p.10)*

This extract demonstrates the expansion of the therapeutic ethos to a field of expertise (emergency work) which Furedi (2004, p.11) describes as “explicitly depend[ant] on the spirit of stoicism and sacrifice.” The psychological and emotional effects of emergency work are brought to the fore under the authoritative knowledge of a psychologist. Moreover, the extract reveals the importance of psychological knowledge in defining “effective coping” strategies and the potential negative psychosocial consequences of not dealing with trauma, including the mention of psychological symptoms such as “flashbacks”, “relationship problems”, “stress” and “burnout.” After educating the reader about the necessity of important coping strategies and *before* reaffirming the detrimental effects of ignoring trauma, the practical use of psychological interventions, such as “trauma debriefing” and “counselling services”, is mentioned. The structuring of this narrative guides the reader to make the connection that the use of psychological interventions is an important aspect of dealing with trauma.

Moreover, the extract mentions emergency workers being “constrained by a macho attitude that prevented them from seeking help.” This statement is an interesting transformation of statements from older articles that instead commended this behavior as forward-focused and resilient. In the above extract the “macho attitude” – the antithesis of a psychotherapeutic attitude – is problematised by a professional psychologist in a profound demonstration of psychologisation.



### **The discourse of closure.**

Talk of ‘coping’ and the “healing process” – as a recent article on the Laingsburg flood worded it (Smith, 2003, p.3) – were spoken about in contemporary newspaper articles as occurring with an end-goal in sight – that is, ‘closure’. The idea of closure was often brought up in relation to barriers to information about disasters; and as a result the need for closure was frequently cited in an attempt to expedite investigative processes, as seen in the following examples:

Extracts (a) to (c) regard allegations that the bodies of black residents were dumped into a mass grave after the Laingsburg floods<sup>4</sup>:

(a) *Ground-penetrating radar scans at the site of an alleged mass grave in Laingsburg started yesterday in an effort to heal the emotional wounds of the community that battled flood waters 22 years ago.* (Smith, 2003a, p.3)

(b) *The results of this excavation... will finally bring closure to a wound which has festered for far too long.* (Smith, 2003b, p.6)

(c) *...the release of the ‘conclusive report’ would begin to close “the last page in a traumatic and divisive chapter of Western Cape history.” He said the government had three objectives with regard to the allegations about a mass grave: “truth, reconciliation and closure.”* (Visser, 2003, p.13)

In relation to the Rheenendal accident, the following article headline:

(d) *“Closure delayed as Rheenendal bus disaster probe stalls again”* (Harvey, 2013, p.6)

In relation to the Tzaneen disaster:

(e) *Ndebele promised a speedy investigation into the crashes... to help the families find closure.* (Chelemu, 2011, p.2)

These are just a few of the many references to the therapeutic idioms of ‘truth’, ‘healing’ and ‘closure.’ By comparison, after a careful search across all the articles written

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<sup>4</sup> These allegations were later proven false

within a few years following the Tulbagh, Laingsburg and Westdene disasters not one instance of the term “closure” was found. This finding shows a dramatic increase in the use of psychological discourse and knowledge in shaping the writing of articles on disasters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, it supports Furedi’s (2004, p.2) statement that with the growth of a therapeutic vocabulary in the layman’s vernacular, “Words that were virtually unknown and unheard by the public in the 1970s would be recognised by most people by the early 1990s.”

In contrast to these findings, the early Boland dataset featured an article titled “Quake folk are tense” (1969, p.6) which centred on the question “How does this make the people of Tulbagh, Ceres and Wolsesly feel?” In the same way that contemporary articles frequently do, this article included the opinions of psychologists. While the psychological prognoses ascribed by the psychologists were overall very optimistic, the integration of psychological symptoms and categories is seen. Psychologists opined that “the experiences of the people in the Boland might have a temporary *depressing* effect,” and stated that the disaster victims “would be living under considerable *stress*” (Quake folk are tense, 1969, p.6)

The rare inclusion of psychological discourses in earlier articles illuminated two points. Firstly, such articles ironically highlighted just how ‘un-psychologised’ the majority of the earlier articles were as ‘therapy news’ (to use Maple’s label) provided such a stark contrast to the rest of the newspaper articles. Moreover, the inclusion of psychological knowledges and discourses in the earlier section of the dataset is mostly *confined* to articles in which psychologists are interviewed. By contrast, in the current decade, psychological discourses were found to be equally incorporated by psychologists, journalists and disaster victims.

And secondly, the existence of such articles amidst the majority of articles with a different tone and focus illuminated the co-existence of completely different discourses and socio-cultural norms in a particular context. Thus, it pointed to the fact that psychologisation is not simply the instantaneous birth of therapy culture, but the gradual increase in the hegemony of the psychological.

## **5. The increase of psychological interventions**

In correspondence with the psychologised interpretation of disasters, there appeared to be a progressive increase in the prevalence of psychological interventions in response to disasters. Being able to discern exactly which psychosocial interventions – and how many – were provided after the disasters is an impossibility because, as is obvious, the reportage was

not dedicated to reporting on psychosocial interventions in particular. However, judging by that which was reported, the dataset suggests a linear progression in the amount of psychosocial interventions implemented after each disaster.

It can be inferred from the newspaper articles that there were no psychosocial interventions in the Boland (1969). Only a single psychologist and a psychiatrist were sent as constituents of the medical team dispatched to Laingsburg (1981) as a part of the military relief effort (Community is strong, 1981). Parents were counselled by their dominee at Westdene (1985) and they could access funds for psychological support in their own private capacity (Davie, 2006). At Rheenendal (2011) the data suggests that counsellors and psychologists were sent to the hospital to council students and parents (Oelofse, 2011). Counselling continued after the disaster and church leaders were a part of the counselling effort (Oelofse & Oelofse, 2011). Finally, after the Tzaneen (2011) disaster a “trauma centre” was established at the Rand Airport when the planes had not landed as scheduled (Du Plessis & Prince, 2011b, p.1). After three hours had passed since the scheduled landing time a psychologist was called in to the trauma centre. When the planes were discovered, four trauma counsellors were sent to a lodge in Tzaneen to help the families of those who died (Du Plessis & Prince, 2011b).

Moreover, this dataset suggests that the provision of *voluntary* psychosocial support was greatest in the Tzaneen and Rheenendal disasters and that the psychosocial response to the Tzaneen plane disaster was the most substantial. While this inference is speculative, what is absolutely clear is the greater prominence given to psychosocial interventions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century newspaper reports. For example, there was only one article mentioning the presence of the psychologist and psychiatrist in Laingsburg (out of the largest dataset of 191 articles). Furthermore, the fact that parents were counselled by their dominee at the time of the disaster was not mentioned at all until a retrospective article was written in 2006 (Davie, 2006, p.6).

It should be noted that for Boland, Laingsburg and Westdene there are countless articles that touch on the relief efforts provided for these disasters, suggesting two things. Firstly, if there *were* more psychosocial interventions they should have been mentioned in the newspaper reports as part of the relief effort. Secondly, of the few psychosocial interventions that are mentioned, most are marginalised in the reports - they are not mentioned in article headlines; they are largely absent from front-page articles; they are not the focus of the article; and they are mostly in small articles. This is a noticeable difference from articles

written on the Rheenendal and Tzaneen disasters where psychosocial interventions are often prominent features of front-page articles, sometimes mentioned in article headlines.

The marked difference in the prominence of features about psychosocial interventions suggests that in recent years obtaining psychological help is not only less stigmatised but also perceived as more important and relevant in the public consciousness. Moreover, the incorporation of the church in providing psychological help at Westdene and Rheenendal is itself noteworthy. Furedi (2004, p.17) cites the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Carey's, lament that "Christ the Savior" is becoming "Christ the counsellor." That is because priests are increasingly encouraged to acquire counselling skills, revealing what Furedi (2004, p.18) describes as "[t]he colonisation of the sphere of religion by therapeutic authority."

Furthermore, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century psychologists were more likely to advocate the importance of psychological interventions after a disaster. This finding is linked to another. In recent years psychologists were also more likely to emphasise a larger psychological burden on the individual (the psychological prognoses given are usually more severe).

Let us consider an extract from a brief article written soon after the Laingsburg flood. The article has the headline "Community is strong" (the quotation marks imply that these are the words of the psychologist interviewed for the article)

*"A military clinical psychologist in flood-devastated Laingsburg has full confidence that the local community will be able to re-establish itself. ....*

*The second phase was a gradual realisation of the full implications of the whole situation that the town they knew would never be the same again, even though conditions might improve... This was the time when people had to be co-ordinated, when military involvement should diminish and civic involvement should be well established." (Community is strong, 1981, p.1)*

Despite the fact that this psychologist is talking about a community in which over 100 people died and most of the buildings and houses were destroyed in the flood disaster, he appears to describe the state of the community in quite a positive light. This is also reflected in the headline "community is strong" – a headline so disparate from those of the contemporary articles in which psychologists were interviewed. The psychologist speaks only of his confidence that the community "will be able to re-establish itself" and even while

describing the phases that the community will go through, he does not indicate long-term psychological difficulties or mental disorder.

Moreover, he does not refer to a need for any psychosocial interventions and instead contends that in the ‘second phase’ outside involvement should diminish and community involvement should be strong. In another article on the experiences of people in the Boland after the earth tremors a psychologist suggests a similarly positive psychological prognosis:

*The experiences of the people in the Boland might have a temporary depressing effect, but he [the psychologist interviewed] did not think they would make any lasting impression on them.*

*The children were unlikely to be affected. “I [the clinical psychologist] get the impression it is all a big adventure for them.” (Quake folk are tense, 1969, p.6)*

While the psychologist interviewed in the above extract states elsewhere in the article that the people of the Boland are most likely under extreme stress, he does not prescribe any psychosocial interventions to help them deal with their stress; in fact, the idea of ‘dealing with stress’ or ‘coping’ are completely excluded from the article. Moreover, he notes foreseeing no consequences for the children involved. This is an interesting contrast from modern day psychology where children and adults have become equally incorporated into psychological interventions (Furedi, 2004).

The prognoses described by the psychologists in these articles are incongruent with contemporary psychologists’ focus on the healing process, coping, closure and the importance of psychological interventions for these processes to occur without long-term psychological consequences – as was demonstrated in the previous theme. We thus see that psychologists are not only instruments of psychologisation, but are also implicated in the process themselves. They are an important cog in the wheel that promotes: a trauma discourse, a focus on emotions, the importance of psychological knowledges and interventions. However, psychologists are also influenced by the rise of a trauma discourse, the decline in a focus on the positive, and the psychologised proclivity to view professional interventions as necessary to learn effective coping skills and provide closure. Psychologists’ discursive practices have themselves become psychologised.

### **Final thoughts and conclusion**

By identifying changes in newspaper articles that report on disasters which occurred between 1969 and 2011 this study has explored the process of psychologisation in South Africa. Five aspects of psychologisation were identified. The first was the rise of a trauma discourse in contemporary newspaper reportage, indicating a shift in the interpretation of disasters. This shift demonstrated an increased tendency toward identifying and focusing on the psychological impact of disasters on the disaster victims. Corresponding to an identification of disasters as traumatic to individuals' psyches, the second theme elucidated the manner in which emotional expression became an increasingly dominant component of disaster reportage. The third theme explained the prominence of the portrayal of the disaster victim as courageous and determined in pre-late-80s newspaper articles. The way courage and determination were intrinsically linked to stoicism in these articles was demonstrated. This demonstration provided an important piece in the puzzle as to why the rise of emotions, characteristic of psychologisation, came at the expense of a decline in the report of courage and determination.

The appraisal of the disaster victim as a traumatised emotional subject underlay an injunction to 'deal with' the trauma. The fourth theme focused on how the contemporary imperative of dealing with trauma is underwritten by therapeutic assumptions and dictated in accordance with therapeutic norms. This manifested in a contemporary pervasiveness of discourses of 'coping' and 'closure.' These very same words ('coping' and 'closure') were almost completely absent in earlier newspaper articles which commended 'forgetting' the disaster experience and being forward-focused. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the use of therapeutic language was in no way confined to the discursive practices of psychologists. Instead, both journalists and disaster victims interpreted experiences drawing on psychological knowledges and discourses. Thus, this theme demonstrated the way therapeutic language has infiltrated the public vernacular.

The fifth theme turned the focus to post-disaster psychological interventions and professional practitioners. This theme revealed that far greater attention and interest is given to the provision of psychosocial aid after disasters in contemporary reportage. By contrast, the rare inclusion of reports about psychosocial interventions before the late-80s is relegated to articles not featured on the front page or simply glossed over in single sentences. This finding suggests that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, seeking out psychological aid is no longer as stigmatised as it was in earlier decades.

A close reading of the interviews with psychologists included in newspaper articles revealed that the influence of the previous four mechanisations of psychologisation were reflected in psychologists' discursive practices. This finding intimates that while psychologists are propagators of psychologisation, they are not precluded from its influence. Finally, to bring 'closure' to the exploration of psychologisation it must be noted that the evidence of psychologisation that is drawn on in this study is not only manifest in the process, but this manifestation serves to reproduce the process it reflects. In the words of McCleod and Wright (2009, p.135) "[s]uch dynamics do not simply reflect larger social processes but are themselves constitutive of those processes."

The significance of this study is clear. It bridges two gaps in the literature. The first regards the paucity of *empirical* research on psychologisation – particularly in relation to the number of theoretical articles on the topic. The second, and more blatant, gap pertains to research on psychologisation in non-western or semi-westernised nations. In South Africa there are currently only two published articles on psychologisation; and like the present study, these studies demonstrate clear manifestations of the process. The findings of the present study, along with the preceding literature review, demonstrate the profound influence of psychologisation upon cultural norms, interpretations of life events, practices subscribed to and even individuals' subjectivities. The significance of the effects of psychologisation demonstrate the need for research to fuel an empirical extension of this field. It is indeed ironic that the psychologised proclivity to interpret, with reference to the impact on the psychological self, has not manifested in a more expansive body of literature on psychologisation.

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## Appendix

### List of newspapers included in the dataset:

- (a) Cape Times
- (b) Cape Argus
- (c) The Times
- (d) The Star
- (e) Rand Daily Mail
- (f) Pretoria News
- (g) The Herald
- (h) The Citizen
- (i) Business Day
- (j) Natal Mercury
- (k) Natal Witness
- (l) Sowetan
- (m) Sunday Tribune
- (n) The Daily News