

## Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Health and Social Justice Activism in Changing Times"

### Politics and Activism in the Water and Sanitation Wars in South Africa

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#### Abstract

This paper focuses on the ways in which activism is undermined in the water and sanitation wars in South Africa. The paper extends previous work that has focused on the politics of water and sanitation in South Africa and is based on an analysis of talk between activists and stakeholders in a television debate. It attempts to make two arguments. First, activists who disrupt powerful discourses of active citizenship struggle to highlight water and sanitation injustices without their actions being individualised and party politicised. Second, in an attempt to claim a space for new social movements, activists paradoxically draw on common sense accounts of race, class, geography, dignity and democracy that may limit activism. The implications for water and sanitation activism and future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** social movements, activism, water and sanitation justice, citizenship, transitional justice

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2018, Vol. 6(2), 543–555, doi:10.5964/jspp.v6i2.917

Received: 2018-01-18. Accepted: 2018-09-28. Published (VoR): 2018-12-21.

Handling Editor: Catherine Campbell, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom

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This paper highlights how activism is undermined in the struggle for water and sanitation justice in South Africa. The paper is written against the backdrop of transitional justice where the state has attempted to address, albeit incrementally, injustices created by racist apartheid. Yet, South Africa remains one of the most economically unequal societies in the world (Beinart & Dubow, 1995; Seekings & Nattrass, 2005; Terreblanche, 2002). While there is a growing black African middle class, income inequality remains mapped onto race and geography. For example, despite constituting 79% of the population, black Africans make up 90% of South Africa's poor (Leibbrandt, Finn, & Woolard, 2012).

'New' social movements, positioned outside of mainstream civil society organisations and party politics, have been active in highlighting the failures of the state in addressing historical injustices (Ballard, Habib, & Valodia, 2006). Known as the protest capital of the world, protests focus on unemployment; poor service delivery such as inadequate housing, water and sanitation, education, and healthcare; crime; corruption; and low wages (Patel,

2013). Activists are met with increasingly hostile police and public responses (Alexander, Lekgowa, Mmope, Sinwell, & Xezwi, 2012).

The paper stems, in part, from my observations of activists' difficulty in highlighting water and sanitation injustices without their efforts being undermined by more powerful ideas of 'citizenship' and 'development'. In my work in water and sanitation, household energy and toxic chemicals; I have been struck by how activist efforts are undermined, vilified and dismissed. Equally striking is how activists struggle to forge a 'new' discursive space to legitimise their activism without drawing on 'old' language about citizenship and development.

On a scholarly level, the paper contributes to the growing literature on the role of social movements in relation to water and sanitation injustice globally (see, for example, Ayee & Crook, 2003; Doron & Raja, 2015) and in South Africa. South African studies, reviewed below, have revealed the complex politics of water and sanitation activism, justice and development in post-apartheid. This paper extends previous work by analysing talk, language and discourses about water and sanitation injustice among a diverse group of stakeholders in a television debate. The analysis of talk and language may be useful to illuminate the discourses that shape the way activism is framed.

I attempt to make two arguments. First, activists struggle to highlight injustices without their actions being individualised and party politicised because they aim to disrupt powerful discourses of active citizenship in South Africa. Second, in an attempt to claim a legitimate space for new social movements, activists draw on common sense accounts of race, class, geography, dignity and democracy that may, paradoxically, limit their activism.

## The Politics of Water and Sanitation Justice in South Africa

Despite the right to a healthy living environment being enshrined in the constitution of South Africa, poor South Africans living in informal settlements continue to bear the brunt of apartheid racial and spatial segregation. Of particular concern are the inadequate water and sanitation services in low income communities. In 2011, 11% of households were without access to piped water, 11% did not have access to sanitation services while a further 26% had inadequate sanitation services that did not meet minimum standards (Statistics South Africa, 2012). The state's view is that the immediate provision of universal water and sanitation services in informal settlements is impossible because of the backlogs and high infrastructural costs, and that there should be 'progressive realisation of rights' as written into the constitution to achieve long term universal coverage.

Two problematic initiatives, prepaid water meters and portable sanitation, have been aggressively promoted by large municipalities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg to address the backlog of water and sanitation services in poor communities. Prepaid water metres dispense a certain amount of free water per month (usually not enough to sustain a household for a month) and people have to pay for the extra water *before* they use it (McDonald & Ruiters, 2005). If people do not have money for water, they have to do without clean water until the next month. Municipalities argue that prepaid water metres are beneficial because the devices provide a limited amount of free water for the poor (water is free if people keep their consumption low), allow cost recovery for consumption over and above the free basic allocation (to offset non-payment of services), promote water conservation (people are more likely to save water if they pay for it upfront), and allow households to control their finances (no unexpected utility bills at the end of the month).

Portable sanitation, in the form of 'porta potties', are provided by the state and are removed after a predetermined period. Porta potties are framed as temporary solutions to more expensive permanent sanitation programmes.

The City of Cape Town justifies porta potties because many of its informal settlements are built on ground that is unsuitable to build permanent flush sanitation because of a high water table, it is difficult to plan infrastructure because of high levels of urbanization and migration, and the city is doing its best to provide interim solutions under difficult circumstances. While both programmes are constructed as for-the-good-of-the-poor, in reality, however, the poor are subjected to insufficient water, inadequate sanitation and unhygienic conditions. Importantly, middle and upper class South Africans are typically spared these programs.

In addition to ongoing legal challenges (one of which was contested as high up as the Constitutional Court), water and sanitation justice activists aligned with 'new social movements' have mobilised in protest. For example, in 2013, activists under the banner of the Ses' Khona People's Rights Movement in Cape Town, threw human faeces from porta potties in a number of public spaces including legislature, at politicians' cars, a national freeway and, most famously, in the Cape Town International Airport. The 'poo protestors' aimed to draw attention to the unhygienic conditions caused by inadequate water and sanitation services. Activists were arrested and prosecuted. Similarly in 2011, activists drew attention to unenclosed toilets using similar tactics. The unenclosed toilet scandal played an important role in local elections in Cape Town in that year (Robins, 2014). Similar activism has taken place around prepaid water meters by the Anti Privatisation Forum, a coalition social movement, in Johannesburg. For example, in 2009 female protestors in Johannesburg wore soiled underwear to highlight the negative hygiene implications of inadequate water and used slogans such as 'stop the war on women's bodies'.

What was once considered a private matter, water and sanitation has become firmly embedded in the *political* in South Africa (McFarlane & Silver, 2017). Local elections have been contested over water and sanitation justice (Robins, 2014); social movements continue to form, morph and distance themselves from civil society formations and political parties in complex ways (Gready & Robins, 2017); and activist tactics vary from slow activism that rely on evidence to make injustice 'legible' to 'spectacle' activism such as throwing faeces and 'sabotaging' prepaid water metres. There are a multitude of actors (scholars, nongovernmental organisations [NGOs], religious organisations, lawyers, the state, social movements, community leaders and so forth) and important concepts such as dignity and the progressive realization of rights in the constitution are being contested (von Schnitzler, 2014). Meanwhile, municipalities attempt to solve technical, engineering and financial mechanisms to deliver water and sanitation services and figure out how to get communities to participate in the programmes. The water and sanitation wars also take place against the backdrop of water restrictions and a drought in Cape Town, increasing urban migration, pressured budgets, and shifting party politics.

In addition, the water and sanitation wars raise larger political questions about the judiciary's role in compelling the state to provide adequate water and sanitation. For example, in the case of Mazibuko and others versus the City of Johannesburg and others, prepaid water metres were deemed illegal by the Guateng High Court but the decision was overturned by the Constitutional Court. The water and sanitation wars also raise questions about the very nature of transitional justice itself (Robins, 2014), and the role of participation (Barnes, 2009). These important questions have been taken up in previous work. Important for this paper, however, is the manner in which *citizenship* is evoked and resisted in the water and sanitation wars.

## Citizenship, Behaviour and the Water and Sanitation Wars

The post-apartheid state has promoted a version of active citizenship that emphasizes partnerships with the poor to assist with their development. In some instances, communities are asked to help build facilities or complete their construction. By the very least communities are asked to adopt technologies such as prepaid water metres

and porta potties in the short term until the state can figure out long term solutions. This version of active citizenship acknowledges rights but emphasizes agency, choice, volition, responsibility and participation (Barnes & Milovanovic, 2015). Citizenship discourses are ever present in national campaigns such as the large scale Masakhane campaign that promoted partnerships between communities and the state to 'make South Africa better'. Summed up at the launch of the Masakhane campaign in 1995, Nelson Mandela stated that "with freedom comes responsibility, the responsibility of participation" (African National Congress, 1995).

Within this discourse, poor South Africans have a right to be unhappy about the slow progress of South Africa's development, but they should express their discontent responsibly (see, for example, IFAISA, 2012). LeadSA, for example, is a national campaign that is widely endorsed by the state, the private sector, the media, and many civil society organizations. It promotes the idea of South Africans taking responsibility for improving the country (Barnes & Milovanovic, 2015). Among others, the campaign promotes a Bill of Responsibilities (to complement the country's official Bill of Rights) that outlines how South Africans should *behave* in order to improve the country and achieve their basic human rights. The discourse also endorses the right to vote, arguing that the poor should exercise their democratic right to vote for an effective political party (Barnes & Milovanovic, 2015).

The behaviour of the poor is central to ideas of active citizenship. The poor should not only take up programs such as prepaid water meters and porta potties, or by the very least be patient with interim solutions while the state figures out long term solutions to the provision of universal basic services; but that they should also express their grievances in appropriate ways such as through local ward councillors, NGOs or recognised community leadership structures. The state also relies on behaviour change campaigns to promote the uptake and sustained appropriate use of the technologies in mass campaigns such as 'Operation Gcina Manzi' that gave behavioural advice about how to use water frugally (including how many times to flush the toilet!) (Barnes, 2009). Importantly, the campaign evoked the need to pay for services as an act of citizenship through slogans such as "your right to services equals your right to pay" and "I've paid for my services, have you?" Thus, porta potties and prepaid water meters are not just technological devices but also 'moral pedagogical' devices (von Schnitzler, 2014) that frames the problem and solution to water and sanitation within a language of morality that promotes ideas of agency, partnerships, volition, participation, responsibility and appropriate behaviour because 'this is the right thing to do'.

Activists disrupt this version of active citizenship by distancing themselves from formal civil society structures (they are mostly 'new' social movements that exist outside of mainstream civil society and the state); are impatient with the progressive realisation of rights (they have had inadequate sanitation and water services for over two decades since the end of apartheid); call into question how much say they actually have in the decisions (participation and consultation are a ruse); and deliberately draw on a 'politics of the spectacle' such as throwing faeces and 'sabotaging' prepaid water metres that deliberately destabilise the idea of a good citizen. It is important to mention at this point that social movements *do* employ other tactics but that spectacle politics are particularly transgressive of active citizenship and are, therefore, the focus of this paper.

Assuming that the politics of water and sanitation justice in South Africa draw on a number of discourses (language, ideas, and interpretive repertoires that frame conceptualisations of activism), I was curious to find out how they played out in 'everyday talk'. There is an established literature in political and social psychology that has revealed how social asymmetries such as race, class and gender are represented and reproduced in everyday talk (Han, 2015). For example, studies have shown that even when speakers are trying to not be racist, they may subtly draw on and reinforce racist notions that they aim to resist (Myers & Williamson, 2001). An analysis of talk among

a group of stakeholders may be useful to not only illuminate the various levels of water and sanitation politics that have been identified in the literature, but to also identify discourses that may inadvertently undermine their activism.

## Methods

This paper is based on an analysis of transcribed data from a television program, *The Big Debate*, which aims to promote debate about important South African issues. The program was aired on a free public broadcaster channel and I downloaded the program from YouTube a few months later. The episode focused on activism in relation to water and sanitation services in low income settlements. The programme was selected for analysis because it demonstrated just how difficult it is for activists to highlight their plight and justify their strategies. The episode (32 minutes and 3 seconds) included members of the public, a representative from the City of Cape Town (the municipality in which the study is located), health activists, public interest lawyers, students, members of social justice organisations, engineers and the leader of the Ses'Khona People's Rights Movement who led the faeces throwing protests mentioned above. These are referred to as 'stakeholders' in the discussion below. In addition, unlike previous studies that have focused on one sector such as prepaid water metres or portable sanitation, this study involved both issues.

The debate was facilitated by an interviewer, Siki Mgabadel. I refer to Siki as 'interviewer' to differentiate her from the audience members. The interview was transcribed using a modified Jefferson method (Jefferson, 2004) and the data were analysed using discourse analysis (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Tileagă & Stokoe, 2015) with a special focus on identifying the subject positions (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998) that were evoked in the discussion. It is important to note that the analysis was not limited to the interaction between the stakeholders (as perhaps some forms of conversation analysis would advocate). This talk was also seen to reflect broader discourses related to the topic (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

I was particularly interested in discourses of how activists should 'behave' and 'develop' and what functions these might serve. In this sense, language is not merely a reflection of the individual's inner world constructs or behaviour, but reflects broader discourses about 'citizenship', 'development' and 'activism'. A discourse analysis moves us away from the assumption that language conveys 'truths' about how people 'think' and 'behave'. Rather this approach views language as used to produce and reproduce subject positions in the contexts of talk.

I also draw on studies that have highlighted how accounts of development, justice, race and class manifests in talk and how alternative accounts, for example, resistance to neoliberalism are undermined (for example, Barnes & Milovanovic, 2015; Dominguez-Whitehead & Whitehead, 2014; Whitehead, 2013).

## Findings

Excerpt 1 is taken from about 16 minutes into the debate when Andile Lili, the leader of the Ses'Khona People's Rights Movement, is introduced.

## Excerpt 1

1 Interviewer: One of the **poo protestors** is here with us today. Andile Lili. **Poo protests. Now**  
 2 **come on?** [incredulous tone] **This is not how you change government policy.** Are you  
 3 really? (.) Do you really think that this is going to work?  
 4 Andile Lili: Obviously (.), I know, (.) you might have that kind of a perception [fidgeting with  
 5 shirt sleeve]. Where we live, we wanted to expose how the African people and coloured  
 6 community in Cape Town are subjected to. And, eh, (.) as **individuals and activists**, we  
 7 cannot tolerate to walk right [showing walking action] across the faeces in our street in Cape  
 8 Town. We are saying that (.) that is totally unacceptable. **And we are saying (.) that is**  
 9 **unhygienic. If it is unhygienic for people who live in Cape Town (.) Eh (.) If it is**  
 10 **unhygienic for people in airport, then it is unhygienic for us.**  
 11 Interviewer: **But come on. One wrong though does not make eh two wrongs don't make**  
 12 **a right. It is a criminal activity that you're engaging in.**  
 13 Andile Lili: I think eh (.) we wanted to expose this to the authorities that eh (.), people are  
 14 living with faeces for 24 hours. And it can never be correct.  
 15 Interviewer: If you wanted to expose these to the authorities, **why go to the airport? Go to**  
 16 **THEM.**  
 17 Andile Lili: Yes, we went to legislature and later on we went to airport to expose not only here  
 18 in Cape Town but internationally. It must be known that our people here are treated so badly  
 19 by a **racist government.**  
 20 Interviewer: **But you're playing politics. You're playing politics, let's be fair, there are**  
 21 **other municipalities run by the ANC all over the country. You could have gone to the North**  
 22 **West, you could have gone to the Eastern Cape, KZN, bucket systems there. Will you tell us**  
 23 **that the poo protests are going to move into ANC municipalities as well?**  
 24 Andile Lili: No, I don't think think that we are paying any politics. **I live in those informal**  
 25 **settlements so I don't play any politics. In fact just now, I am just a suspended member**  
 26 **of the ANC so you cannot say that I am playing politics. In fact I am talking to the issues**  
 27 **affecting the black people in Cape Town.**  
 28 ALL: Applause [Andile Lili sits down]  
 29 Interviewer: Show of hands from everybody in the room. How many of you feel that the so  
 30 called poo protests are justified?  
 31 [Approximately 70% of the audience put their hands up]  
 32 Interviewer: Interesting, interesting, that's a lot of people Ernest [turning towards Ernest  
 33 Sonnenberg from the City of Cape Town].  
 34 Ernest Sonnenberg: I think the point that you have just made is that this is not just in the City  
 35 of Cape Town. In actual fact in a lot of other cities it is even worse. But one must understand  
 36 also and **I am putting it to Andile Lili that his (.) his first suspension was not because of**  
 37 **the poo protests. His first suspension was because of other charges where the City took a**  
 38 **decision to ask the provincial minister to remove him from council. So in actual fact his poo**  
 39 **protest was having a second bite at the cherry of becoming or remaining a councillor and**  
 40 **trying to get communities to show the ANC that he has got community support. Because**  
 41 **subsequently when the 8 members who were with him got arrested, then suddenly the poo**  
 42 **protests subsided.**

Despite Andile's attempts to justify the protests, the interviewer and the City of Cape Town representative (Ernest Sonnenberg) question the motives behind the protests. They suggest that the protests were driven by individual and political motives to promote the African National Congress (ANC). Cape Town, at the time of writing, was run by the Democratic Alliance (DA). This is done in a mocking and infantilising tone (for example, Lines 1-3) and by calling the protests the 'poo' protests, by using terms such as 'playing' politics and by pointing out how the protestors

should have dealt with their concerns (“why go to the airport, why not go to THEM”) to raise concerns. Even when Andile mentions that he is a suspended member of the ANC, and that he speaks as an individual on behalf of all black and coloured people in the City of Cape Town, his actions are put down to his personal motives to promote party politics. In Lines 20 and 21 for example, the interviewer asks, “Will you tell us that the poo protests are going to move into ANC municipalities as well?” In Lines 31-39, Ernest argues that the reason Andile led ‘his’ poo protest was to garner support to be able to get back into the ANC. He also suggests that Andile cannot speak on behalf of all the poor black people because it was only Andile and eight others who participated (not all black people) and the protests stopped as soon as they were all arrested. Put differently, the protests would have continued if the protesters were speaking on behalf of so many people. We see, therefore, attempts to undermine the Andile’s *independent activist* position and focus on his individual motivations and desires to get back into, and promote, the ANC.

What is interesting is how difficult it is for Andile to speak against the programs from the position as an individual *and* an activist who is aligned with a social movement that is independent of political parties. When confronted with the accusation that he is ‘playing politics’ he goes to great lengths to position himself as an independent activist, that he lives in the communities and that he is speaking from first-hand experience of living with the faeces. He emphasizes that he has to walk through the faeces and that people like him have to live with the faeces for 24 hours. His emphasis on walking is meant to demonstrate his ‘closeness’ to the issues.

Interestingly, he draws on common sense South African discourses of race, class, geography and politics. For example, that the Democratic Alliance (DA) is a racist party driven by white interests whose members are out of touch with the lives of poor, black township residents (like himself); that the poor are less likely to be in the airport compared to the rich (hence the protest action there) and that politicians do not live in poor communities (therefore, he cannot be ‘playing politics’). Despite his attempts to be apolitical in the party political sense, he draws on precisely the same common sense notions of party politics, race and class that he attempts to avoid.

The interviewer and the City of Cape Town representative draw heavily on the ‘active citizenship’ discourse mentioned above that provides a moral framework for how citizens *should* behave. Much of the discussion focuses on Andile’s individual psychological ‘motives’ behind the protests, his inferior ways of understanding the situation, his repulsive behaviours (throwing faeces in public spaces) in addressing the issues, his misperceptions of his influence in, and representation of, the community, and that residents will have poorer health and dignity and be in weaker position to ‘develop’ without the programs. In addition, in resisting the programs in the manner the protestors did, Andile and fellow protestors signalled that are not willing to work *with* the state. Within this discourse, poor people have the right to protest but they also have the *responsibility* to protest in appropriate ways (mentioned throughout the debate).

The exchange could have taken a very different form. The discussion could have focused on the fact that there are legitimate reasons for the protests; hinted at by the interviewer ‘two wrongs don’t make a right’ but not followed through in the discussion (prepaid metres and porta potties have been fought in the courts as high up as the Constitutional Court). Andile Lili could have agreed that *was* playing politics but not party politics (around the world, people engage in protest using their bodies to draw attention to injustices, it is not difficult to find examples of this). In response to the accusation that he was playing politics, he could have argued that he was indeed trying to get back into the ANC (which he eventually did following the last local government elections), but that party politics do not preclude him from voicing his and others’ dissatisfaction. It is perfectly possible to assume that

politicians from the DA would be black and even live in resource poor communities. It is possible that the poor can, and do, find themselves in the airport. It is also possible that Andile Lili and co-accused could have represented the interests of the poor without having to be democratically elected by them. Each of the speakers, however, drew on common sense accounts of class, race, geographic inequalities, party politics and democracy. Importantly, Andile found it very difficult to construct a discursive frame that allows for 'new' activist sub-politics (Rose, 2000) without drawing on an 'old' language of race, class, party politics and geography.

Dignity is an important theme in the water and sanitation justice debates. For example, the question of *how much* water is needed for dignity was an important theme in the legal battles around prepaid water meters in Gauteng, what von Schnitzler (2014) calls 'metrologies of dignity'. In overturning a high court judgement, the constitutional court concluded that prepaid water meters and the free basic water allocation were constitutional because they met the basic needs of the poor – nothing more. What was ignored in the courts, however, was the indignity of running out of water when, for example, there is funeral or when there is no money to buy water upfront, the indignity of being told how many times to use the toilet or the indignity of knowing middle class South Africans are spared these technologies.

In his accounts of dignity in Excerpt 1, we see Andile drawing on 'bare life' politics (von Schnitzler, 2014) that, similar to 'metrologies of dignity', reduces dignity to its minimum. In the poo protests, and evident in his account above, Andile brings private bodily functions into the public gaze to highlight indignity and injustice. Such tactics were also used in the open toilet scandal where activists evoked the imagery of poor black women having to use the toilets without doors in open fields and being subjected to sexual violence. Similar tactics were deployed in panty protests where old women wore soiled underwear to highlight the indignity of prepaid water.

The danger of bare life politics, however, is that they represent the black body in its minimal form - a body only in need of help to avoid suffering. Bare life politics may also inadvertently reinforce mainstream ideas about the backwardness of the poor (what kind of a person would collect and throw faeces or wear soiled panties in protest?), their entitlement at wanting water and sanitation for free without 'working' for it, and provides more evidence of the need to educate them about the reality of water and sanitation provision through 'a change of behaviours' indicated by Ernest Sonnenberg in the following extract.

Excerpt 2 is from 30 minutes into the debate. The debate turns to prepaid water meters and water conservation, or the alleged lack thereof, by the poor in drought stricken Cape Town. Water conservation was a major motivator for the implementation of prepaid water meters based on the assumption that because water was subsidised for the poor, then they would be inclined to waste it. An audience member questions why it is that only the poor are subjected to prepaid water meters while the rest of the city are not. The audience member suggests that the biggest water users are agriculture, industry and rich Capetonians. It does not make sense, therefore, to have restrictive and unfair prepaid water meters implemented only among the poor. The excerpt picks up when Ernest Sonnenberg from the City of Cape Town defends the prepaid water metre initiative and suggests that it is not only the poor that receive prepaid water meters but that rich Capetonians who have payment arrears are also given the option of prepaid water meters in exchange for having their debts written off. Clearly missing the point that rich South African are given the option to have prepaid water meters only when they are in arrears; to add insult to injury, Ernest Sonnenberg indicates that the rich can have their debts written off if they choose prepaid water meters. The debate includes Phumeza Mlungwana, an activist from the Social Justice Coalition - a social movement focusing on justice issues in South African informal settlements.



## Excerpt 2

1 **Ernest Sonnenberg: If a person are in arrears with their water what we say is before we write**  
 2 *off your arrears we give you the option of installing the water management device so that we*  
 3 *can have a **change in behaviors**. It's about **teaching** people that this is 350 liters and if I am*  
 4 *going to wash the clothes on Friday I need to **conserve so that I can build up reserves**.*  
 5 *Interviewer: Phumeza what do you make of this?*  
 6 *Phumeza Mlungwana: We know that we do not have enough water. But like that a lot of the*  
 7 *taps you see they are always leaking, there's no repairs. This speaks directly to the issue of*  
 8 *maintenance. It is not like there is not money or there is no water or there is no nothing but*  
 9 *its engagement and the fact that we they not doing enough in informal settlements.*  
 10 *(Audience member, name not given.): If I may go to [Andile] Lili's first statement then. Lili*  
 11 ***was elected by us as the members of the community** and we don't care the council fired*  
 12 *him or whatever but he clearly is a **born fighter. He is fighting for our rights** and he was*  
 13 *called by the community and law so. And this may come and but this government of this*  
 14 *Western Cape only care about the **white people, the white rich people**. And they are taking*  
 15 *the issues on the racist way. Because of if you, you can check the issue of water, **the***  
 16 ***shortage of water, it's black and coloured people**. The issue of the water is black and*  
 17 *coloured people. **Why does some van Tonder and the van der Merwe not using this***  
 18 ***porta potty (.) =***  
 19 *= Interviewer: Isn't that from apartheid?*  
 20 *Speaker: No! The city of Cape Town is **upgrading** (sarcastic tone) from the apartheid*  
 21 *system into **nowadays because they changed the colour of the bucket to be white***  
 22 *(Audience laughing). You see the colour of the bucket was black. So they make the colour of*  
 23 *the porta potties to white because of they are trying (laughing) (audience laughing), what*  
 24 *they are trying to do they want us to think the porta potty is better than the bucket but they*  
 25 *are upgrading the same system of apartheid.*

Ernest Sonnenberg expresses how the ultimate goal of prepaid water meters is a 'change in behaviours' to conserve water and 'build up reserves' again calling on an active citizenship discourse. The assumption is that the majority of poor households will waste water if they do not have to pay for it, that the poor and the few who cannot afford to pay for that water can change their behaviours through expert knowledge and technological intervention (prepaid water meters are often accompanied by psycho education campaigns to 'educate' the poor about water conservation and the benefits thereof, for example, saving water, no unexpected bills and so forth). He uses the example of washing clothes in a condescending tone to explain how the poor should think about conserving water through careful planning and taking responsibility and control for their water consumption. The point made by the second speaker (Lines 7-9) that the real problems lie with the poor maintenance of existing water infrastructure (for example, leaking communal taps) in informal settlements is ignored.

The assumptions he makes are that the poor are wasteful and irresponsible because they do not care how water is consumed because it is free or highly subsidized, that they need intervention from experts who can 'teach' them about water conservation, and that they could be better, more responsible citizens if they adopted the prepaid water meters. Prepaid water meters are for their own benefit (they will get their free basic water allowance every month, they can carefully plan their water consumption and take control of their expenditure with no unexpected bills), the city will benefit (less water wastage which means that money can be redirected to more pressing development programs) and that there will be environmental benefits through water conservation. The dubious sub-text here is that poor have relied too heavily on state handouts for the basic needs, which is financially unsustainable and that the poor should exercise responsibility in terms of how they consume water. Again, the rest of Cape

Town are spared prepaid water meters or, by the very least, have the option of having them. We see, again, the construction of active citizenship that places the blame and responsibility for water and sanitation on the poor.

An audience member redirects the conversation to Andile Lili and the allegations that he was operating as a lone wolf criminal with party political aspirations whose intention was to disrupt the DA led municipality (Line 10). He attempts to legitimise Andile's claim to speak on behalf of the poor by suggesting that residents elected him regardless of his party political affiliations because of him as a person. By using phrases such as "*Lili was elected by us as the members of the community and we don't care the council fired him*", he alludes to the possibility of a different but legitimate democratic structure in social movements that works independent of the party political structure. He further emphasizes the individual qualities of Lili as a born "fighter" who is "fighting for our rights" outside of party politics. As in Excerpt 1, the speaker attempts to legitimize activism through the creation of discursive space for this new social movement by using the same call for democracy that he is critical of (our elected officials have let us down).

He proceeds to argue that the city is racist because the prepaid water meters and porta potties are directed at blacks and coloureds while whites are spared, "*Why does some van Tonder and the van der Merwe not using this porta potty*". As in Excerpt 1, he draws on common sense accounts of race, class and geography in South Africa. It is possible that there are black people with that surname who live in informal settlements (in fact there are), but what he means is rich white people of Afrikaans descent who live in more affluent suburbs who are spared the scourge of porta potties.

In Line 19, the interviewer interrupts the speaker and attempts to 'explain' the situation by suggesting that water and sanitation inequality was caused by the apartheid state and that the city is doing their best to resolve the issues. The speaker dismisses this argument firmly (No!) and suggests that racism has continued as poor black and coloured populations continue be treated unfairly. Using humour and sarcasm to emphasize his point about racism, he states that all that has changed in the 'upgrade' from apartheid to 'nowadays' is that the black buckets used in the bucket system have changed to white porta potties. Because porta potties are white, the city expects the poor to believe them to be superior "but they are upgrading the same system of apartheid".

## Concluding Remarks

There is a growing body of literature focusing on water and sanitation justice in South Africa. This paper extends previous studies by identifying how activism may be undermined in talk. Resistance to activism by new social movements draws on notions of individual agency and responsibility that are embedded in powerful discourses of active citizenship promoted by the state. In addition, activists' justifications draw on common sense accounts of race, class, geography, dignity and democracy that may, paradoxically, limit how new activisms can be framed. For example, it is possible that new social movements can be aligned to party politics, cut across race, class and geography (for example, the recent drought in Cape Town galvanised water conservation activities across race, class and geography), promote more complex conceptualisations of dignity beyond bare life politics and that new social movements can exist without democratic structures (Andile did not need to be elected by the community to represent them). None of these positions, however, were possible in the discourses drawn on in the debate.

This study's findings may influence future studies of activism in the context of transitional justice. Future studies could investigate how the discourses elicited in this study translate into how activism is framed. For example, how do academics, policy makers, activists and the judiciary draw on active citizenship discourses and how does this serve to promote or impede activism? The findings may also have practical implications for activism. If activists are aware of the subtle ways in which their framings are limited, then they could perhaps anticipate, adjust and construct a new language of activism that extends beyond the entrenched lexicon of active citizenship in South Africa.

One criticism of this study is that the findings are based on a single debate that may have limited applicability to the broader issue of water and sanitation. What can talk about poo protests reveal about actual poo protests? The intention of this paper was not to analyse the activism itself but to identify the ways in which activism is framed and impeded at the discursive level. I have attempted to show how the analysis of talk can reveal how activism is framed and, importantly, undermined. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate further political and social psychology research on activism in water and sanitation justice in the global South.

## Funding

This work is based on funding from the National Research Foundation (grant number 90791).

## Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

## Acknowledgments

The author has no support to report.

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