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Storying ourselves: Black Consciousness thought and adolescent agency in 21st-century Africa

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ABSTRACT

Mindful of 2020's global focus on questions of systemic racism, this article looks at the continuing salience of the South African activist Steve Biko's ideas about Black Consciousness and consciousness-raising as they impact young people's empowerment in African countries. In the context of the UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund (UKRI GCRF) Accelerate Hub (2019–24), a project exploring interventions in adolescents' lives across the continent, it considers the ongoing relevance of Biko's thought in changing mindsets, challenging institutional racism, interrogating the dependency relations that underpinned 20th-century African aid programmes, and transforming the narratives young people in Africa tell about themselves. The article outlines how Hub workshops introduce young people to the Biko-inspired practice of storytelling as speaking from where you stand, resisting negative stereotyping. It offers recommendations concerning agency and intervention drawn from Biko's key text, *I Write What I Like* (1978).

KEYWORDS

Steve Biko; Black Consciousness; intervention; adolescent agency; race and racism

Our stories draw from our history, but we also have a lot of autonomy and power around how we draw from the roots of that history. [...] The bricks we use to build the future belong to the present and the past. The future is not removed from the now. (Siphokazi Jonas; see Narrative and Adolescence: Workshop Summary, 2020))¹

Introduction

The socio-historical meanings of racial identity, and the ways in which inequalities in health, education, and economics are sustained by cultural perceptions of racial identity, are often secondary in discussions about interventions targeting young people in African countries today. Instead, policymakers, politicians, and researchers tend to narrowly focus their debates on governance, health, and education (Mangu [Forthcoming](#)). The research underpinning this article is part of an effort to shift the focus of research on young people and intervention to include understandings of identity from the humanities and social sciences, and lay greater emphasis on how storytelling and other representations support identity-construction. To do this, we reassess the important

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thinking on race and social change of the Black Consciousness (BC) activist Steve Biko (1946–77). We explore the significance of his work to earlier generations of young activists battling racism and apartheid, especially in his home country of South Africa, and then turn to the continuing relevance of his thought today, in shaping young African people's understanding of their environment, its exclusions and restrictions, and its impacts upon them. To inform our discussions, we investigated where in southern Africa Biko's work is taught and studied at the tertiary level (with the results summarized in the Appendix).

This research emerges from the Accelerating Achievement for Africa's Adolescents Accelerate Hub – a large four-year initiative funded by the UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund (UKRI GCRF) (2019–24). The Accelerate Hub's goal is to improve outcomes for 20 million adolescents and their children, in 34 countries across Africa. It set out to achieve this by identifying interventions that have the potential to improve, simultaneously, multiple outcomes related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and to work with governments and other service providers to help them adapt and expand their services in response to the research. The Hub has close partnerships with a number of governments on the continent and a range of multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and works closely with the African Union through the African Union Development Agency. COVID-19 frustrated these plans, but the Accelerate Hub was able to adapt. By March 2020 it had brought together the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), among others, to develop a set of resources for parents during lockdown. These resources have been estimated to have reached close to 25 million children and adolescents within 8 months of release. The Hub continues to work on a range of interventions, in collaboration with teams across the continent, including an app-based version of an established parenting programme, cash transfers to households in Kenya, and labour market interventions in South Africa and Rwanda.

However, recognizing that many of the interventions currently being implemented for adolescents fail to consider just how complex the lives of young people can be, the Hub includes a “work package” (WP3) intended to innovate by drawing in more holistic, qualitative understandings of people's lives. Led by economist Chris Desmond and literary scholar and writer Elleke Boehmer, WP3 explores how context-led, narrative-based, and neurological approaches, singly and in combination, can produce innovative ways of reaching out to young people and shaping interventions, including through storytelling. We therefore look closely at the role of narrative in shaping how African adolescents understand themselves and their place in the world, and at how narrative helps us understand the adolescent and their actions. We also explore how context influences young people's perception of themselves and how this may impact their behaviour and their responses to existing interventions. For example, school dropout, risky sexual behaviour, including with older partners, and a low uptake of available services are all behaviours influenced by how adolescents see their context and themselves within it. Throughout, the work of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) has proved especially helpful in highlighting the effects of perception and mindset

on the understanding of race, the self, and African contexts in the Hub's work. It foregrounds how people see and tell their own story. This work has also resonated in clear ways with wider student-led movements in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent concerned with resisting racism, sexism and the influence of the colonial past.

In this article, we report on our ongoing research on adolescent intervention and storytelling as it might be enabled and illuminated by Biko's ideas. The article is guided by qualitative findings from a three-day workshop, "Narrative and Adolescence", held in Cape Town, March 2020, as well as by our ongoing remedial work with Teen Advisory Groups (TAGs) in townships around Cape Town and in the Eastern Cape from 2016 onwards. Both activities set out to develop close relationships with adolescents to facilitate their involvement. In respect of the March workshop, we liaised with a number of youth groups prior to the event to develop a shared understanding of the goals and how they might participate. The first day, entitled "Me and My Stories", centred on adolescent participation; the subsequent two days drew representatives from the youth groups into the further discussions. The first day included activities like performance, singing, drawing, pageantry, and spoken-word poetry, facilitated by specialists in adolescent participation such as Clowns without Borders. Throughout, we discussed how the stories the adolescents told about themselves contrasted with the stories they felt were told about them. Across the day, themes of stories that stifled creativity and inhibited expectations came through strongly. Yet, though the young people felt that they had had to work hard to break free of stereotypes, they also felt positively encouraged by the channels for self-expression and positive creativity that the workshop provided. The young people also felt motivated by different kinds of stories, not only a particular set of stories, such as about national heroes, but an accessible spectrum of stories ranging from Cinderella tales through to self-help narratives (Boehmer, Davies, and Kwanu 2020). The TAGs report related findings, including throughout the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown (Gittings et al. 2021). During this period, storytelling provided young people with a sense of agency, and hopeful stories of recovery involving people "like them" were especially inspiring (Boehmer, Davies, and Kwanu 2020). The themes emerging from the March workshop and the TAGs reinforced and helped develop the WP3 view that Biko's message is still politically relevant and charged across Africa, although not only in Africa, today.

Though with adaptations especially around gender and sexuality, as we explore, BC ideas can challenge the way academics, researchers, and policymakers go about designing interventions that can have positive impacts on adolescents' lives. Beginning with a section on the BCM in the 1970s, and the Accelerate Hub's response to BC thinking in the 2020s, the article goes on to examine the ways in which the history of aid and intervention in Africa has informed current African attitudes about western interference and imposition, and how that intervention has been directed (top-down, from the Global North onto the South).² We then examine the vibrancy of BCM in the contemporary moment and consider how it speaks back to ideas of top-down intervention. We close by deliberating over the workability of a BC approach in future adolescent intervention design. Drawing on responses from participants and panellists at the "Narrative and Adolescence" workshop, we offer recommendations for how BC framing might begin to provide an effective rubric for interventions with adolescents in Africa (see Narrative and Adolescence: Workshop Summary 2020; Boehmer, Davies, and Kwanu 2020). In

particular, by using a wide range of participatory methods, as described, the “Narrative and Adolescence” workshop found that BC ideas stimulate young people to speak and write themselves into futures that are imaginative and speculative, and so to exercise agency. This suggested, therefore, that BC approaches can help us to improve our research on adolescence. BC can guide us in taking account of the multiple intersecting influences on adolescents, including race, gender, and socio-economic status, and so help us to design interventions appropriately.

Steve Biko, BCM, and the Accelerate Hub

In apartheid South Africa in the 1970s, Steve Biko’s BC ideas galvanized Black youth by raising and articulating issues of inequality and oppression that were already keenly felt (Gibson 1988; Hirschmann 1990; Buthelezi 1991; Mngxitama, Alexander, and Gibson 2008; Magaziner 2010). The BCM that emerged from these protests used a language of empowerment that appealed at once to young people’s emotions (frustration, anxiety, anger), *and* to their political imagination (Woods 1978; Mangcu [2012] 2014). BC thinking clearly drew on influential ideas of Black self-awareness and resistance to the white gaze from the Martinique psychoanalytic theorist, Frantz Fanon (especially *Black Skin, White Masks*) (Gibson 2008). The BCM then related these concepts to the very particular situation of the South African townships under apartheid in order specifically to foster the expression of “group pride and the determination by the Blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self”, and set aside negative self-perceptions (Biko [1978] 1987, 68). The BCM itself was led by young university students who sparked ideas of a collective Black identity and collective Black action by laying a strong emphasis on self-motivation and political destiny, keenly aware of their context of continuing neocolonialism, as Kwame Nkrumah had defined it (Nkrumah [1965] 1999), and of apartheid in particular. This energy found channels in community development projects in which youth were trained through group participation. Creative art and literary projects also provided a fruitful ground for self-education. As BCM thinker Andile M-Afrika observed at the Accelerate Hub’s March workshop, the Movement was one in which “members were engaged in working on their own minds” (see Narrative and Adolescence: Workshop Summary 2020).

Biko’s approach, expressed in his collection *I Write What I Like* (Biko [1978] 1987), crucially proposes that our understanding of ourselves in society can be changed by how we act. This has become a critical point also for our work on adolescent intervention. In the 1970s, Biko outlined what we might now term a decolonial narrative, one that many Black South Africans could identify with. He described how racially divided contexts and racial perceptions influenced people’s decisions and mindset in negative ways: “A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine” (Biko [1978] 1987, 29). But he also outlined how that narrative could be changed by our thinking and acting differently, and how such change could empower:

part of the approach envisaged in bringing about ‘Black consciousness’ has to be directed to the past, to seek to rewrite the history of the Black man and to produce in it the heroes who form the core of the African background. (29)

Biko's efforts to imagine other possibilities and encourage Black people to search for and discover their own heroes (including theorists, activists, and artists), enabled young people to set aside limiting narratives, and learn from and tell stories of their communities and themselves. As also in our research, the simple act of engaging the imagination opened portals to envisaging how life can be different.

Charged by these ideas, the Accelerate Hub is interested in how storytelling, including in social media and in politics, can appeal to and motivate adolescents. How does narrative operate as a platform from which to articulate their needs? In contexts where the stories that are told about adolescents in their communities may not always match the stories that they would like to hear about themselves, or that would inspire them, Biko's special insistence on changing the racial narrative is particularly appealing, as we have found. The Hub's work has focused from the beginning on Biko's provocation that the positive stories we tell about ourselves can help us exercise agency in our lives, whereas negative stories told both by others and by ourselves can constrain our flourishing. Stories that heighten self-understanding and mobilize agency are to be encouraged, and others discarded. It is a matter of weighing this perception:

Reduced to an obliging shell, [the Black man] looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the inevitable position. Deep inside his anger mounts at the accumulating insult, but he vents it in the wrong direction – on his fellow man in the township, on the property of Black people. (Biko [1978] 1987, 92)

And holding it in critical balance with this:

Freedom is the ability to define oneself with one's possibilities held back not by the power of other people over one but only by one's relationship to God and to natural surroundings. [...] Hence thinking along lines of Black Consciousness makes the Black man see himself as a being complete in himself. It makes him less dependent and more free to express his manhood. (92)

In our research, we keep in focus the question of how a BCM approach, designed to empower and not direct, and collaborating *with* youth, can help us to use and learn from storytelling approaches. How can Biko's ideas be applied in designing interventions relating to adolescents on the continent?

BC self-fashioning and gender

Important and impactful though they were in context, Biko's ideas were not without criticism. As we explore his salience for our times and for our research, it is important to address this critique head-on, not least in relation to gender. For, while BC raised awareness of unequal power relations, it was unambiguously sexist in its terms of reference, and did not consider women, in particular Black women, as having equal agency to Black men (we note Biko's reference to "manhood" above, for example). This male emphasis led Aleya Kassam, a March 2020 workshop panellist, to call for a BC recognition of human fullness and complexity across the spectrum of identity. She noted: "if our heroes are complex and textured, if we see their vulnerabilities, it reminds us that our own are valid. [...] we must be careful not to mirror the very erasure that has been performed upon us" (see Narrative and Adolescence: Workshop Summary 2020). Her

words help highlight how we can learn from a BC approach through creative adaptation, even as we acknowledge its pitfalls, and gain insight even from these.

As scholars and activists like Gqola (2001), Magaziner (2011), and Mahali (2017) persuasively demonstrate, the BCM was male-dominated, and its language was unapologetically masculinist. Mamphele Ramphele, a South African public figure and Biko's then-partner, admits that women did not matter as leaders in the movement and the focus was undeniably on the men even though Black women could be seen as doubly oppressed – by the apartheid system that also oppressed Black men, and by the Black men themselves (Yates, Gqola, and Ramphele 1998). In general, the politics of BC treated the male experience and the male subject as normative.

Yet, at the same time, women did play prominent and critical roles in BC, from as far back as the 1970s. For example, they pointed out that even their cultural and aesthetic choices – how they dressed and wore their hair, which cosmetics they used – were critical to the functioning of the BCM. In contemporary readings of BC, theorists lay emphasis on the need to historicize and defend Biko as being “a product of his time”, convinced that if he were alive today, he would be an ally and sensitive to the oppression of women. While allowing this, the point we wish to add is that of BC's continuing relevance not merely but *especially* to young Black feminists and womanists. After nearly five decades, a new generation of young people, women as well as men, are taking up Biko's values and philosophies to embody a rejection of whiteness and, instead, instil in the Black community a sense of “pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life” (Biko [1978] 1987, 49). As they point out, this sense of pride in no way excludes Black women. Black women take BC ideology forwards by purposefully and deliberately gendering it to raise and bring into prominence their concerns.

The #BlackGirlMagic movement is a compelling case in point, where a virtual space inspired by BC is attempting to alter the dominant narrative that promotes whiteness as definitive, especially among girls and women. The hashtag #BlackGirlMagic has become a tool that Black women use globally to explain the ways in which the recognition of Black merit intersects with social justice, promotes positive acknowledgement, and celebrates the physical beauty of Black women in a world that would otherwise objectify and invisibilize the Black and brown female body and mind (McDaniel 2016). #BlackGirlMagic can indeed be described in the terms Biko used for the BCM, as “a culture of defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity” ([1978] 1987, 46). #BlackGirlMagic suggests that since (Black girls'/women's) shared humanity has been taken as historically insufficient, “then perhaps it is time to identify and celebrate what is distinctive, sufficient and ‘magic’ about Black girls and women. We see this being exemplified in music, fashion, art, performance, poetry, and other creative methodologies” (Mahali 2017, 30).

Literature and music, and even cosmetic arts, produced by Black girls and women, provide a self-exploratory, freeing space that works against the historical silencing of that group's narratives. Or, as the writer Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us in her important essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”, cultural expression like poetry is not inconsequential: “For Lorde poetry is dynamic because it is a manifestation of ideas and experiences that have not yet formed” (Mahali 2017, 30). Biko also talked about the power of poetry for Black people, when he wrote that “with Africans, music and rhythm were not luxuries but part and parcel of our way of communication” ([1978] 1987, 42). This thinking correlates

in strong ways with the racially astute work of Beyoncé Knowles, for example, as in her much-anticipated 2020 film *Black is King*, described as “a love letter to Blackness” (Respers 2020). Remarking on the project’s timeliness, she observes that the “events of 2020” – referring to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor – made

[the film’s] message even more relevant, as people across the world embark on a historic journey [...] I believe that when Black people tell our own stories, we can shift the axis of the world and tell our REAL history of generational wealth and richness of soul that are not told in our history books. (quoted in Respers 2020)

The Bikoist forces of renewal Beyoncé calls up remind us of Biko’s own account of soul – that

with its all-engulfing rhythm [...] immediately caught on and set hundreds of millions of Black bodies in gyration throughout the world. These were people reading in soul the real meaning – the defiant message “say it loud! I’m Black and I’m proud”. This is fast becoming our modern culture. ([1978] 1987, 46)

This bold rebellion was intended to destabilize the psychological impacts of unequal racial power relations, including the historically extractive intervention that has characterized external influences in Africa. It could also be seen as one of the many media through which Black bodies choose to “story themselves”. Biko’s emphasis on defiant Black messages now takes us to the ways in which the us-and-them narratives of international programmes relating to Africa, and of Structural Adjustment in particular, can be impacted by his thought in especially positive ways.

Interventions in Africa: How the past informs the present

This section draws the ongoing impact of BC ideas and the concept of intervention closer together to consider the often-problematic ways in which intervention has been understood and designed for African contexts since the 1970s. We want to demonstrate how a BC emphasis on uneven power structures and “superior–inferior white–Black stratification” can help to highlight the dependency relations and curtailment of agency that have often accompanied intervention (Biko [1978] 1987, 24). To date, notoriously, intervention in African countries has generally been from “us onto them”, where “us” is the west. Already in the 1970s Biko noted this trend:

There is no doubt that the Black–white power struggle in South Africa is but a microcosm of the global confrontation between the Third World and the rich white nations of the world which is manifesting itself in an ever more real manner as the years go by. ([1978] 1987, 72)

Biko goes on to critique this lasting stratification of the white man (the west) as “a perpetual teacher” and the Black (Africa) as “a perpetual pupil (and a poor one at that)” (24).

In recent years, top-down ventures from “the west” onto “the rest” have been called into question globally, including from platforms informed by pan-African and BC ideas. BC thought, with its emphasis on structural inequality and the need for at once collective and individual empowerment, certainly helps to sharpen the terms in which these questions are asked. As Biko argues:

Does this mean that I am against integration? If by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by Blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of Blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behaviour set up by and maintained by whites, then YES I am against it. [...] If on the other hand by integration you mean there shall be free participation by all members of a society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society as determined by the will of the people, then I am with you. ([1978] 1987, 24)

Historically, in Africa, there has been a strong sense of reciprocity in giving, although this was obscured by colonial rule which brought non-reciprocal “gifting”, such as charity, into the African relational landscape. The new notion of “gifting” was based on a givers-and-receivers dichotomy, which took for granted that the givers were wealthy western nations and the receivers poor and African. This perception is implicit even in 20th-century literature on development and philanthropy, and, to an extent, remains present in western interventions on the continent today (Everatt et al. 2005, 278).

From the 1980s, western intervention in the African continent took the predominant form of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), and these certainly demonstrated top-down patterns (Loewenson 1993, 718). Perceived as development by the Global North, and experienced as imposition in the Global South, SAPs were introduced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to over 40 countries in Africa as the development community moved from financing investment to promoting policy reforms (Dollar and Svensson 2000). Following the givers–receivers dichotomy, the assumption was that frameworks developed in the Global North could be seamlessly transported to the Global South, despite differences in people’s environments, relationships, and circumstances (Boehmer and Davies 2018, 48–58; Mahali et al. 2018, 3).

As a consequence, SAPs were not only met with growing mistrust in the Global South; they also, structurally, perpetuated the economic dependency of these regions. The overblown expectations of the SAPs were reviewed in the early 1990s, and the international donor community then transitioned to reducing conditionality, and to more direct bilateral and multilateral funding agreements with African governments. However, despite these shifts, and some adjustment to the top-down approach, Africa remains to this day stuck in the controlling grasp of the Global North, including China, as regards development (Lawson et al. 2002). African countries now receive sector-specific funding which influences policy through the grant holder; for example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in respect of education, or the WHO in respect of health (Ratha, Mohapatra, and Plaza 2008). Africa has also witnessed an increase in technical assistance from donor states whereby “experts” are deployed to help run important government programmes (Gibson, Hoffman, and Jablonski 2015; Tang and Bundhoo 2017).

As BC thought anticipated from as far back as 1977, dependence on aid from western countries continues to have a harmful effect on institutional development and economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa. Or, as Gillanders (2016) reveals, whilst direct aid seems to work in terms of generating economic growth, it does not do so to a level that can be called transformative. Relatedly, Wako (2011) concludes that bilateral and multilateral aid on its own, or in interaction with policy, is ineffective at enhancing economic growth.

With the rise of #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) and related movements since the mid-2010s, the giver–receiver logic that drove the SAPs, for example, has been challenged in

important ways that harmonize closely with BC thought. For example, #BLM has defied the language of giving with the cry “open your purse”, with its implication that activists and protestors would accept money from “so-called allies” or even “oppressors” as long as Black lives were benefitted (Cheng 2020; Lewis 2020). The “us–them” distinction no longer matters so much: celebrities, corporations, and other wealthy people and organizations are all designated, and the finance is used to assist with bail funds, protester support, legal aid, and so on (Lewis 2020). On social media, companies, and influencers who call out police violence are told to “put their money where their mouth is” and so redistribute wealth and resources – from white to Black, wealthy to poor, privileged to systemically disadvantaged – in all cases targeting top-down models (Cheng 2020; O’Hara 2020).

As this suggests, in the context of a research project like the Accelerate Hub, the BC emphasis on Black self-reliance can powerfully assist with thinking about giving, donation, *and* intervention in more equitable, democratic, and collaborative ways – ways that are also, hopefully, less extractive. As we have seen, the BCM offered a survival kit that encouraged Black people to remake their environment – and how they thought about their environment – through exercising self-possession and collective agency, without fixating on the oppressive conditions of apartheid or neocolonialism. Expanding on this, certainly for academics in the North, BC thought can usefully help to challenge and inform how we go about designing interventions – essentially by shifting the centre and interrogating white dominance. In terms that Biko would have applauded, the Nobel Prize-winning African American author Toni Morrison offers a helpful guideline when she comments how her work demonstrates that the Black so-called “periphery” is *already* at the “centre”. Responding to criticism of her deliberate focus not only on race but on Black stories (where white people are marginal), Morrison observed:

You can’t possibly understand how powerfully racist that question is, can you? Because you could never ask a white author, when are you going to write about Black people? Whether he did or not/or she did or not. Even the inquiry comes from a position of being in the centre and being used to being in the centre. And saying, “is it ever possible that you will enter the mainstream”? It is inconceivable that where I already am, *is* the mainstream. (Morrison 1998a)

In taking this strong and eloquent stance, Morrison was vitally inspired by African writers like Chinua Achebe and Bessie Head who, as she put it, “could assume the centrality of their race because they were African” (Morrison 1998b). In her work, and that of many other Black writers and artists today, Black mentalities and histories are placed properly and powerfully in the mainstream, so interrogating the invisibility and marginalization of the past.

The vibrancy of BC in this present moment: Biko’s thought in tertiary education institutions in Southern Africa

If BC helped to expose inequalities and the unevenness of interventions and development programmes in Africa from the 1980s, in the 2010s the self-making and empowering aspects of Biko’s thought returned with renewed force, especially in southern Africa. While #BLM movements across the world shed penetrating light on the structural

inequalities that fuel racism, not least in education, in South Africa and elsewhere in the subcontinent, the resurgence of BC ideologies impacted syllabuses and pedagogic approaches in ways that are worth acknowledging in an account of BC's ongoing relevance.

So it is revealing to observe not only that BC thinking is still being taught and applied today, but that these applications are increasing in number. Many tertiary education institutions in southern and East African countries continue to teach or hold events to commemorate BC and Steve Biko's work (see Appendix). More than 80 percent of South African universities feature courses in subjects such as sociology, psychology, and literature that relate to BC thought and/or use Biko's writings as reading material. Several institutions host an annual Steve Biko or BC-related lecture. These events seek to engage young people in discussions of salient issues affecting South Africa's political, economic, and social development – and so, in essence, set BC ideas of self-actualization in motion. As the lawyer and Biko's colleague Barney Pityana said in a 2016 talk at Stellenbosch University: “the resurgence of Black Consciousness is happening at universities because students are challenging the lack of progress [in addressing racism]” (quoted in Cadden 2017, 62). Speaking directly to the impact of BC ideas on the 2015–16 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student movements across South African tertiary institutions, Pityana noted how the BCM supplied them with “both a political and a philosophical critique” of the societies they aimed to transform.³ For Masupuye Herbert Maserumule, “[the students’] struggle seeks to restore and assert Black pride – the essence of Biko's philosophy of Black Consciousness” (Maserumule 2015; Cadden 2017).

BC's future relevance

For research on interventions in African countries, what does this critical retrospective and recuperative work on BC teach? We have observed the renewed and deepening interest in Biko's thought among young people in southern Africa and more widely today. It has also become clear that such reawakened BC approaches can help us productively critique earlier interventions by the west or north into African countries, as we have tried to show.

At the “Narrative and Adolescence” Accelerate Hub workshop, youth representatives and researchers led by panellists Aleya Kassam, Nanjala Nyabola, Alude Mahali, and Andile M-Afrika discussed how we might move forward with BC ideas, and build ideas of positive storytelling into our understanding of intervention (see Narrative and Adolescence: Workshop Summary 2020; Boehmer, Davies, and Kawanu 2020). Specifically, how do we deploy a BC approach in future adolescent intervention design?⁴ In closing, we now summarize some of the salient responses arising from these March 2020 deliberations, and offer recommendations for how BC framing might begin to provide an effective rubric for adolescent interventions in Africa. As our workshop findings and supplementary TAGs activities suggest, the creativity of storytelling and the self-ideation it encourages stimulate young people to think of themselves as playing positive, transformative roles within their communities, and as exercising agency in their lives (Boehmer, Davies, and Kawanu 2020; Gittings et al. 2021).

For Biko, in any situation of marginalization or oppression, it was essential to identify the limiting narrative, understand how it came to be and break it down in order to replace it with a more positive and empowering one. As he observed, political writing is often not sufficiently future-looking: it is descriptive only or mainly of the present. Biko's own writing invites us to take an important step further, allowing that, yes, "these are the problems we're facing", but also "this is how we can fix them", including mentally. He wrote:

In order that Black Consciousness can be used to advantage as a philosophy to apply to people in a position like ours, a number of points have to be observed. As people existing in a continuous struggle for truth, we have to examine and question old concepts, values and systems. ([1978] 1987, 92)

BC offered ways to develop motivating stories that would destabilize these old values, offering people the freedom to write themselves into more open, speculative, and constructive futures – a principle that continues to guide all Hub work on adolescent participation. As Biko put it:

Having found the right answers, we shall then work for consciousness among all people to make it possible for us to proceed towards putting these answers into effect. In this process, we have to evolve our own schemes, forms and strategies to suit the need and situation, always keeping in mind our fundamental beliefs and values. (93)

When it comes to the young people at the core of our Hub project (or any research project based on intervention), BC considerations of self-empowerment are clearly crucial, nudging adolescents to self-organize in community development projects, and pushing for principles of collective action. In this way, people, including young people, can take power by imagining themselves as agents or authors of their own action, as Biko suggested. When people believe they can do something (such as when they are inspired by a story, whether Beyoncé's, Toni Morrison's, or Biko's own, as it emerged from the workshop), they are immediately more open to acting as if they can actually can do that thing; that is, act in self-empowered ways. The most powerful thing that movement-building and associated storytelling activities can give is the tools for people to start imagining themselves as agents. As we also find in TAGs, stories can help shape and reshape the boundaries of what we think is possible.

As we have explored, Biko developed a narrative which he believed could help Black people better understand the oppressive environment in which they lived and the multiple ways in which that environment injured them. He did so by closely examining those unequal contexts and observing, in himself and others, the constraints they imposed on self-understanding and on our sense of future possibility. At the same time, he observed how a more liberating narrative interrogating the self, and the self in context, could oust and replace those harmful ideas. Learning from Biko's approach, as Andile M-Afrika observed during the Accelerate Hub workshop, also involves learning from the process he developed and constantly reapplying it – a process which requires our adjusting and readjusting to our ceaselessly changing environments, as we find in #BlackGirlMagic.

If we can start to integrate these Bikoist ideas not just in the implementation of adolescent intervention but in design and recruitment, the interventions will have a more meaningful impact because they operate simultaneously at the levels of the individual, the community, *and* the institution. Embracing dialogue, creative practice,

and better access to resources and networks, they also create a multiplier effect. In the difficult and disjointed social contexts of the Global South, rebuilding communities around such constructive activities is essential for producing meaningful and lasting social change. The critical and creative self-reflection that lies at the heart of positive action is also inspiring for young people, counteracting tendencies they may have to blame themselves for structural constraints that are outside of their control.

We recognize that we need to deliver interventions in ways that address universal challenges (such as natural resource pressures, and the unequal distribution of wealth), as well as context-specific ones (such as the impact of colonial histories and related power dynamics) (Huq and Reid 2004; Robinson and Parnell [2011] 2012; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al. 2005). Intervention carried out across a wide array of contexts can help promote a better understanding of the plurality of aspirations, interests, and localized meanings that feed into efforts to improve well-being (Boehmer, Davies and Kawanu 2020; Mahali et al. 2018, 20). BCM approaches can then become not just a “part of the genealogy of Black liberation movements, rooted not just in describing the material conditions that people are living in”, but also, as Nanjala Nyabola says, a movement through which different futures can be imagined and enacted (see Narrative and Adolescence: Workshop Summary 2020).

Conclusion

In sum, what does it mean to build on BCM ideas in intervention design? First and foremost, it means centring the human being. Doing so requires, at a minimum, that those involved in intervention design and implementation invest time and energy in understanding those they seek to work with, along BC lines.

For maximum impact, interventions must work closely with participants, as we have done in our workshop activities. Intervention designers need to recognize that they can only *facilitate* sustainable outcomes, not produce them. In all situations, they should acknowledge the locality and community in which individuals live and how these influence them. Therefore, they must ask how the design of the intervention can be structured to be as empowering as possible – always foregrounding the participant as the author of their own story. Throughout, framing is critical. Interventions are always interpreted by those who experience them. To take the example of cash transfers: when provided by non-governmental organizations they can be seen as a handout or as charity and so as demeaning; when provided by the state they can be seen as affirming citizenship (or refugee status), and the rights which accompany that.

Finally, and, once again, as Biko emphasized, an acknowledgement of the importance of context should always shape intervention design. As Fanon-inspired and decolonial thought also urges, we need to consider how environments can hinder positive outcomes, including through the internalization of negative and limiting narratives (Ngũgĩ 1986; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu 2018). BCM and related decolonial approaches highlight the importance of sharing interpretations and stories that counteract these negative representations, often through dialogue and creative practice. Intervention designers need to think carefully about how such dialogue and creativity can be facilitated and supported.

The process of applying BCM thinking to intervention design is demanding, including for participants. But, we contend, the potential benefits are well worth the

effort. Justice is not cheap nor is its pursuit easily quantified. Throughout, our emphases are dual and reciprocal – *both* on collective action *and* on foregrounding individual agency.

Notes

1. These are remarks excerpted from Jonas's presentation at the Accelerate March 2020 workshop on "Narrative and Adolescence". See Narrative and Adolescence: Workshop Summary (2020).
2. We use the terms Global North (formerly, the west) and Global South to refer to the global division of the planet along the Brandt line into developed and developing nations. As no African nation currently has developed country status, we take the seemingly sweeping nature of these terms to be justified.
3. The RhodesMustFall (RMF) campaign galvanized a series of national student activist movements including "Disrupting Whiteness" (Cape Town), "Rhodes So White" (Rhodes University), "Transform Wits" (University of Witwatersrand), the Open Stellenbosch Collective (Stellenbosch University), and "Black Thought" at the University of Johannesburg. As well as a fight against looming tuition increases, #FeesMustFall was equally about oppressive institutional cultures wherein "white domination persists" and racial inequality is reproduced (Cadden 2017, 62).
4. Resources pooled together from the panels at the Accelerate Hub workshop and project can be found here: <https://www.acceleratehub.org/resources-0>.

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Appendix

Country	Tertiary institution	How Biko's work or Black Consciousness (BC) is applied
Kenya	Dedan Kimathi University	Awarded President Thabo Mbeki an honorary PhD in recognition of his push for BC across Africa.
South Africa	University of the Witwatersrand	Has the Steve Biko Centre for Bioethics which is committed to the values of justice, dignity, respect, and freedom – both intellectual and academic.
	University of Cape Town (UCT)	Has been running the Annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture since 2000. On April 5, 2017 held a seminar entitled "Disruption by (Curriculum) Design: using Biko's <i>I write What I like</i> as a Teaching Tool in the South African Social Sciences". <i>I Write What I Like</i> is one of the set texts in the UCT English third-year core course Movements, Manifestos and Modernities. In 2020, it was paired with Soweto and BC poetry.
	University of Pretoria	The Faculty of Law teaches a short course on critical race theory (CRT) which invites a radical approach to South African social and economic relations that advances the centrality of race as key to that approach, in the same way that Franz Fanon and Steve Biko postulated. Has the Steve Biko Academic Hospital in its portfolio. Black Consciousness will be drawn upon to diagnose the widespread omission and repression of white domination and its material and symbolic implications from the academic curricula in the disciplines of law, humanities, and social sciences. Teaches the jurisprudence of Steve Biko and BC in the Faculty of Law.
	University of Johannesburg (UJ)	Ran the Steve Biko Lectures in Philosophy from March 2015 until November 2017 to continue this interrogation and critique of modernity from the epistemic standpoint that Steve Biko's life and thought represents and symbolizes. Biko's work covered in teachings at the Faculty of Education.
	University of KwaZulu Natal	On Wednesday, May 15, 2019, UJ in partnership with the Steve Biko Foundation will host a public discussion titled "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Towards Real Economic Transformation" at the Kingsway Campus. On the same day they hosted a FrankTalk Regional Conference under the theme "Promoting Economic and Political Empowerment to Preserve Democratic Principles and Rights". Hosts the Annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture.
North West University (NWU)	Stellenbosch University	Has through Digital Innovation South Africa curated and brought to life Biko's "interviews" and works. Teaches Biko's work in the African Political Thought module of its Faculty of Military Science. In the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) lecture of 2016, Professor Barney Pitsoyana (professor emeritus in law, Unisa honorary professor, Philosophy Department, Rhodes University and STIAS fellow) presented a talk with the title "Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Philosophy: A Contribution to South Africa's System of Ideas".
		Department of Psychology has held a series of seminars in which Biko's work was presented and discussed. Held a collaborative exhibition between the NWU Gallery and the Black Lawyers Association Student Chapter titled "Black Consciousness Through Art: Attacking The Status Quo From All Spheres".

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Country	Tertiary institution	How Biko's work or Black Consciousness (BC) is applied
	University of the Western Cape	Holds the Annual Steve Biko FrankTalk Dialogue.
	University of the Free State	Launched the Steve Biko, Mangaliso Sobukwe, O.R. Tambo Leadership Conversations in 2013. BC has been covered in the King Moshoeshoe Memorial Lectures.
	Rhodes University	Held a Guest Seminar on Expanded Identity Theory, based on the work of Steve Biko in 2019. On Tuesday September 15, 2015, the Rhodes University Student Representative Council (SRC) gathered along with other students and academic staff at the Bantu Stephen Biko Building for the Steve Biko Commemoration unveiling.
		Hosts the annual Steve Biko Competition for learners from various local high schools. The event was organized by the Equity & Institutional Culture office to commemorate the passing of Stephen Bantu Biko and in preparation for the competition, the learners are given a copy of Biko's 1978 compilation of writings <i>I Write What I Like</i> to read and are later given an in-depth workshop on the book. The learners usually recite essays and poetry, sharing their experiences of getting to know of Biko more through the materials they were given.
	Nelson Mandela University	Holds the Annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture at the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy.
	Durban University of Technology	Held the Steve Biko Memorial Lecture Series 2011–16. Hosts the annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture.
	University of Venda	In partnership with UMTAPO Students Movement, held the first Steve Biko Memorial seminar at Ritson Campus in 2017. Hosts the annual Ubuntu Seminars.
	University of Fort Hare	Through its National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHCS), it is the custodian of the archives of the Liberation Movements such as the BCM.
	University of Limpopo	BC is promoted through the annual Abram Onkgopotse Ramothibi Tiro Lecture.
	Sol Plaatje University	On September 27, 2019, held a seminar titled "The Contested Meaning of Black in Black Consciousness".
Zimbabwe	Africa University	Held the Black History Month Commemorations in 2018.
	Midlands State University	Teaches Steve Biko in the "African Social Theory" course of their sociology degree as well as in the "Critical Social Work" course of their Master of Science in social work degree.