

#FeesMustFall and its aftermath. Violence, wellbeing and the student movement in South Africa

by Thierry M. Luescher, Angelina Wilson-Fadji, Keamogetse G. Morwe, Antonio Erasmus, Tshireletso S. Letsoalo, Seipati B. Mokhema, Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2022, 224 pp., R465.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780796926340

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BOOK REVIEW

#FeesMustFall and its aftermath. Violence, wellbeing and the student movement in South Africa, by Thierry M. Luescher, Angelina Wilson-Fadiji, Keamogetse G. Morwe, Antonio Erasmus, Tshireletso S. Letsoalo, Seipati B. Mokhema, Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2022, 224 pp., R465.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780796926340

The book *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* documents student experiences and reflections on violence and opportunities for maintaining and restoring their well-being in the context of the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015/16. It curates over 100 photographs collected through the research project "The New South African Student Movement from #RhodesMustFall to #Fees-MustFall", published alongside captions and narrations written by students and facilitated by the research project team. The team consisted of 15 individuals (seven researchers, a visual graphics editor, two curatorial collaborators, and student activists who continued to contribute to the project beyond their initial involvement in the PhotoVoice workshops). Mainly, it focuses on the contributions from 35 former student activists and student leaders from five universities (University of Fort Hare (UFH), University of the Western Cape (UWC), University of Witwatersrand (Wits), University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of Pretoria (UP)).

Critical to the research project is its application of PhotoVoice as a primary method that allows a community and individuals to use photographs to document issues important to them and then select an environment (e.g. a workshop, focus group, or individual interview setting) to reflect upon, explore the reasons, emotions and experiences that have guided their chosen images. This was further enhanced by adding a World Café method where other relevant stakeholders (university staff members, academics, student affairs practitioners and university managers) were invited to join a collective process of reflecting on the images students curated through the PhotoVoice workshops at each institution.

Photographs were selected by participants as most reflective of their experiences of violence and well-being during the #FeesMustFall protests and brought to the PhotoVoice workshops to engage and discuss before preparing their narratives.

The book aims to follow the ethos and principles of collaboration, empowerment and authentic illustration and thus, "many pictures are deliberately blurry, pixelated, or distorted" (p. 85). While the students took some pictures during their participation in the PhotoVoice workshops, they mainly harvested memories from their online social media archives, cell-phones and laptops. The book also documents the journey of the research team, their analytical and theoretical reflections, and their journey of uncovering these student experiences and perspectives. It is organized into 18 chapters, of which 13 make up the photo exhibition (presenting the student's photographs, their titles and short reflections). The remaining five chapters deal with the conceptual approach, methodology, reflections, findings and engagements from the authors with relevant literature to highlight broader insights.

Overview of the book

The research project that gave rise to the book wanted to "explore the ways that students understand violence, recover from exposure to violence, and restore some form of wellbeing" (p. 3). As violence and well-being are core constructs, the book starts with situating

conceptually the research team's approach to the notion of well-being, particularly student well-being, in Chapter 1. The authors veer away from the tendency in well-being research to focus on the positives of life; instead, they align themselves with understanding well-being as fundamentally dialectical, not a reflection of the absence of adversity but being able to embrace the complexity of life.

Chapter 2 then explains the decision to retain the concept of violence to capture the physical altercations between students on campus and police and security services. The contribution is situated away from the tendency in studies of violence toward associated pathology/ies, highlighting that "violence may be more complex ... [it] can take many forms (e.g. spectacle, symbolic, embodied, systemic, implicit in everyday conditions of life) and can be mobilised to bring attention to socio-political and economic challenges" (p. 4).

Chapters 3 and 4 then start sharing photographs and reflections to show students' understanding and identification with the *History of the struggle* and the reality of the *Oppressive spaces* that universities can be. Under the first theme, a student offered a somber-looking picture of himself taken at the UFH in what used to be an office of the Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania (PASMA), commenting that this picture shows him "remembering how the issues affecting students used to be addressed without violence" (p. 23). Under the theme of *Oppressive spaces*, a student shares a picture of Marthinus Theunis Steyn's statue at the UFS (which was removed from the campus during the COVID-19 lockdown). For him, this statue represented "an artistic meaning that this space was not meant for people of colour ... a violent articulation" (p. 26) of white hegemony and symbolic anti-blackness. Chapters 5 and 6 are entitled, *The Violence of Institutions* and *Conscientise and Mobilise*. Chapter 5 presents photographs that illustrate how the institutions entrusted to emancipate and empower young people can end up acting in contradiction to their purpose in "shutting off engagement and repressing critical dissent" (p. 35). This is movingly illustrated by a student's photograph containing a placard stating, "people, not stones!!" Chapter 6 offers a collection of images demonstrating the student movement's power in creating a sense of common purpose, shared commitment and developing collective identities.

Chapter 7 illustrates photographs organized under the theme of *Protest and violence*, while Chapter 8 concerns the theme of *Fire*. Both chapters were stark and challenging to confront. The visuals in Chapter 7 showed the extent to which the student protests were engulfed by violence either in retaliation, oppression, and victimization, or in the instigation of violence and brutalization. For example, there is a set of pictures showing the physical marks, bruises and wounds caused by rubber bullets, which the student narrates; "I reflect on the revolutionary support I get from my family, comrades, and friends after being brutalised by the police, arrested and detained for seven days in prison without medical attention" (p. 71). Chapter 8 illustrates how fire can be used physically and symbolically to create a focal point for gathering, a weapon, terrorizing, creating chaos and as a hearth to repose and fellowship.

Chapter 9 elaborates on PhotoVoice as an action research methodology and how the addition of the World Café methodology enhanced the research. Chapters 10–12, deal with the themes of *Gender inside the movement*, the *Fear and trauma* experienced, but also the *Outcomes of protests*. For example, alongside a picture that shows 11 activists of which only one was female, a student writes that the picture "represents how our space was male-dominated" (p. 91). In Chapter 11, the scope and extent of the impact these experiences will have on well-being is clear as one student reflects alongside a photo of the student counselling and health wellness center at UFS, "after 2015/16, I was never the

same person and every day we fight not to relapse” (p. 100). Finally in Chapter 12, there is reflection on the implications of the protests through photographs of peaceful engagements and remembrance of past activists.



Chapter 13 again reflects on one of the key purposes of the research project and book, entitled *Advocating change*. It describes from the view of the authors the intention of the book as seeking to tell “the truth, however inconvenient” (p. 115). Chapters 14–17 present the final set of photographs organized under the themes of *Utility and solidarity*, *Wellbeing*, *Escape and safe spaces* and a *Movement with purpose*, which, in my perspective, serves to unite the contrasting aspects of violence and well-being towards the notion of purpose.

The book closes in Chapter 18 by pulling together insights about the “nature” of violence and well-being from the student narratives. Students recognize violence as: fire, demanding reaction, historical, spatial, institutional, structural, epistemological, gendered, racist, personal and spiritual. On the other hand, students recognize well-being as: a vector, acknowledging limitations, material, spatial, social, familial, epistemological and spiritual. Bringing these two seemingly contradictory aspects together, the authors conclude that well-being is not about living a problem-free life. It is about being appreciative and content with life despite challenges; struggling to overcome with purpose is part of the journey, and even some forms of violence can have well-being effects.

Reflections

The book portrays students during the student protests, how they reflectively understand, critique, reminisce, and relive the manifold ways they experienced the student movement. The authors emphasize that “as an output of an action research project with explicit political advocacy goals” (p. 12) it does not try to present a balanced account. The work has sociological relevance in that it illustrates methodologies able to access the complexity of human experience, often sanitized through methods aiming to quantify and generalize. At the same time, however, PhotoVoice is not without limitations. Not all experiences and social phenomena are observable or able to be photographed. Similarly, claims that the method allows increased reflection, observation, and elaboration have been challenged. Unfortunately, a more critical reflection on the methodology, particularly its truncated implementation due to COVID-19, was absent in the narrative and could have been another valuable contribution to guide future higher education research. While applying World Café could have addressed this limitation, other than discussing it as a methodological addition, the findings and insights from this process were not included in the narrative. Nevertheless, as a qualitative method rarely used in higher education research, it is my view that this book can serve as a useful guide and conduit for reflection as we strive to ensure that societal institutions remain accountable, compassionate and responsible.

The book also takes the subject of student violence from newsworthy to documented and archived academic research content, allowing further in-depth work on the nature of violence and ways to restore well-being collectively. Being confronted with stark images documenting moments of extreme desperation is emotive and forces the reader to interrogate their position and possibly privilege in society. In so doing, it also raises questions of individual well-being beyond the higher education system. Are students able to function well in the aftermath of their experiences? How have they been affected mentally and psychologically, and how will this reverberate into the well-being of society? How are societal institutions impacting people, their sense of self, their space in the world, and their ability to occupy spaces in the future?

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