Exploring the ethical principle of social responsibility and other ethical issues in the context of the mental health professionals' response to xenophobic violence in Cape Town

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

The violence of political conflict and wars that have led to humanitarian crises, creating increased numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons across the globe, have focused attention on the psychology profession's responsibility in the broader social and political issues that affect individuals, families, and communities. The principle of social responsibility, which forms part of most international codes for professional psychology, provides a framework for this expanded role of psychologists. This article explores the meaning of the concept and practice of social responsibility using as backdrop the Mental Health Professionals' Response to the xenophobic violence that broke out nationally in South Africa in May 2008. The article explores some ethical dilemmas faced by psychologists in their work in one of the safe sites created for victims and survivors of xenophobic violence in Cape Town. It argues that compared to the psychotherapeutic framework, which is based on the individual as the unit of analysis and treatment, social responsiveness invites a much more complex relational experience that often requires psychologists to play multiple roles as part of their intervention.   The article concludes with reflections about how engagement in social responsibility might create an opportunity for dialogue about the centrality of an ethics of care and compassion in professional psychology.