

The Thunder before the Storm: Identity Constructions of Black South African Female Students, by Ms. Bonolo Moposho and Prof Garth Stevens



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Abstract

This was an exploratory study with a view to understand the identities of Black South African women in higher education. The study is placed within the context of the historically white university in South Africa. Through focus groups, the study investigated the experiences of sixteen South African Black students; with a focus on their race, gender as well as class subject positions. A viewpoint of the intersectional and complex nature of identity was seen to be integral to understand the identities of Black female students. The students' articulations of their university experiences were explored, qualitatively, through three focus group discussions held at a historically white university in Johannesburg. Results show that historically white universities perpetuate the discourses of South Africa's apartheid past and students' identities are consequentially influenced by this. The implication is an alienation of the Black identity in higher education.

Keywords: Black female students, higher education, identity, post-apartheid South Africa

Introduction

The recent protest action by South African university students across the country, raising a voice of dissent against exclusionary practices in higher education illuminates a frustration that has been a long time brewing. The movements such as: #RhodesMustFall, #Feesmustfall, #OpenStellenbosch, #UPrising, and others are the fruition of frustrations about not being fully included in higher education. The issues of rising fees, language, representation and access to resources are raised by the students; a manifestation of dissent that has been festering within tertiary institutions for many years.

This research describes how the identities of Black¹ women students at the University of the Witwatersrand are affected by these and other covert processes of marginalisation and alienation. Theirs was a silenced voice of dissent articulated through focus group discussions with similar others. This current generation of students are amplifying their voices and demanding that they be heard.

¹ The use of the category of 'Black' was not intended to re-inscribe the essentialist asymmetries of South Africa's past, but to use it with the awareness of how asymmetries continue to be socially constructed and reflective of South African and global social relations (Stevens, Swart & Franchi, 2006).

In 2003, Kader Asmal, the then Minister of Higher Education, explained the disjuncture between the mandate set out by South Africa's constitution and what was occurring in reality (Walker, 2005). Despite the aim of creating transformation policies for the purposes of all people feeling "at home in higher education", this was not the case, as educational spaces continued to be tarnished by the discourses of the past (Asmal & James 2003, as cited in Walker, 2005, p. 135). These discourses, deeply rooted in education systems, have significant consequences.

"Colonial and apartheid education systems were, by themselves, among the strongest tools of identity deformation and subjugation and were designed to assure the permanency of the established (and at convenience modified) status quo" (p. 155). (Abdi, 1999):

A great challenge facing the South African system of higher education was in shifting from one of inequality to one that embraces diversity and equality. The admission of Black students has steadily increased since 1983 when historically white universities were permitted by the apartheid government to admit Black students. However, despite the steady increase in the admission of Black students, exclusion and racial disparity continued to occur covertly (Walker, 2005). Mabokela, found this in her study at Wits University in the early 1990's; Black and White students barely mixed and "feelings of alienation among Black students" were a significant indicator of continuing racial exclusion (Mabokela, 2001, p. 97).

Throughout the apartheid regime, quality tertiary-level education had been limited to white students "as Coloureds and Asians (were) very largely, and Africans almost wholly, excluded from skilled occupations" (Macquarrie, 1960, p. 172). Education was a facet of South African society that was used as a platform to perpetuate the ideologies that held the apartheid regime together. Inequality and prejudice characterised South Africa's higher education system for much of the country's history (Mabokela, 2000). Without transformation, the higher education sector runs the risk of perpetuating these injustices.

South Africa's past has had "large scale identity effects" (Hook, 2003, pg. 114). In particular; the Black identity manifests as a subject position rife with ambivalence and conflict. Fanon (1967) spoke to the psychological effects of racial subjugation. He asserted that the minds of the oppressed are colonised, and are in need of liberation. His assertion was that in the context of white supremacy, inferiority is internalised in Black identity (Fanon, 1967). Decolonisation, therefore, needs to occur at

the level of minds. The decolonisation of “intellectual landscape” through contexts such as the university, is an avenue towards this (Mbembe, 2015; Oelofsen, 2015).

The goal of decolonisation is the restoration of ownership and the creation of a new being not limited by skin colour or “appearance” (Mbembe, 2015). The perpetuation of Black inferiority in the higher education context negates this goal and propagates the afflicted identities of Black subjects. Left unchallenged the consequence of this, as seen now, is insurgency. A louder and more urgent call for the transformation of higher education in South Africa has ascended.

Conceptual Framework

With a critical stance this research drew from critical race theory and Black feminism. These frameworks endorsed a critique of the hegemony of society, allowing for a stance that acknowledged the power of dominant groups seen as significant to the position of Black women.

Bell Hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (Hooks, 2000 as cited in Lamothe 2005, p. 2267). It sees the need for women to heal from the “psychological wounds” resulting from this subjugation (Hooks, 1995), and Black feminism in particular aims to give voice to the experience of Black women in reflecting on the varying forms of subjugation they have experienced (Hill-Collins, 1990). Furthermore Black feminism emphasises the exploration and expression of Black women’s’ experiences in the creation of knowledge (Few, Stephens & Rose-Arnett, 2003). This view holds that the needs of Black women are distinct because of their racial and gender oppression and therefore this body of thought aims to emancipate and empower Black women and in so doing challenge their oppression (Hill-Collins, 1990).

Black feminism can be seen as a merging of the theories of critical race theory with feminism (Few et al, 2003). Critical race theory mandates that the “experiential knowledge” of Black people be acknowledged (Walker, 2005, p. 132). Through uncovering the stories and counter-stories of subjects in society, it is sought that the structures and constructions, particularly those of exclusion and oppression, be exposed and a relocation of power sought (Delgado, 1989, as cited in Walker, 2005).

Using the Critical race theory lens ensures an acknowledgement of how racism intersects with other forms of subjugation to affect the lives and experiences of Black people. Furthermore, the theory necessitates clarity around the difference in experience between Black and White people due to

this. The stance is that a “silence” on this difference limits the propensity for social justice. Dialogue on the experiences of oppression and subordination is seen as crucial (Yosso, 2005).

Critical race theory has a liberatory vision in that whilst the permanence of racism is acknowledged, this recognition parallels a drive to change and end it (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Critical race theory emphasises the need to give voice to the experiences of racial oppression and aims to emancipate those affected (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The experiential knowledge of those affected by racism is sought to this end (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

Discourses of the Historically White University Context and Identity

As social subjects, the contexts in which we find ourselves informs our subjectivity. Subjectivity, as a continuum of identities, is thus “dynamic and multiple” and “often contradictory” as opposed to rational (Mama, 1995, p. 69). Identification is the locating of self within a “matrix of symbolic similarities and differences” and is connected to the discursive conditions within a society (Durrheim & Mtose, 2006, pg. 15; Hill & Thomas, 2006). It is thus necessary to consider the relationship between the self and the social context and the resultant interconnected nature of multiple identities (for example, racial, ethnic, class and gender).

Walker (2005) described a “minimisation discourse” that the University responded with to racist practices that allowed for the re-inscription of the power of race, and thus colluding with it (Walker, 2005, p. 137). She reported on exclusionary practices in her exploration of student narratives and institutional discourse at an Afrikaans-medium university. In 2003, complaints of racist victimisation occurred as a group of white students assaulted a Black student in a university residence (Walker, 2005).

At the beginning of the 20th century, King (2001) found that as costs continued to rise in light of diminishing sources of funding, many students struggled to find a sense of security about their place in the institution.

Discriminatory practices continued to be supported by many historically white universities’ institutional structures. The historical white university perpetuates racial exclusion through institutional contradictions in discourse, which was observed when Black students were formally admitted to student populations, but concurrently were subtly or rather covertly excluded (Walker, 2005). These structures indicated that the historically white university had not accomplished the ideal of being a completely non-sexist and non-racist environment (Mabokela, 2000).

Potgieter & Moleko (2004) have asserted a lack of implementation of “transformative policy initiatives” in higher education. They investigated how Black women’s careers at historically white university’s are resultantly affected (Potgieter & Moleko, 2004, as cited in Jackson, 2005). The assertion was that Black women, in particular, are ‘shut out’ by processes in higher education institutions.

Institutions validate only “Eurocentric, masculinist knowledge” (Potgieter & Moleko, 2004), evidenced by the persisting underrepresentation of Black women both at the level of lecturers and scholars at post-graduate level (Mabokela & Mawila, 2004). Jackson describes the experience of Black women in institutions of higher education as “alienating, disempowering, and dismissive if left un-interrogated and unchallenged” (Jackson, 2005, p. 105).

According to Bulhan’s model of “cultural in-betweenity”, educated Africans having been “acculturated”, “westernised”, or “dtribalised” are seen as to be in the stage of capitulation (1985, as cited in Stevens & Lockhart, 2003). Inherent in this state is a sense of alienation (Bulhan, 1980). This exposes an inherent problem in the process of becoming educated as it is synonymous with becoming “westernised”. Identities as a result, being excluded, are forced to shift and accommodate the dominant culture of the education space.

Education is a crucial location for identity formations, and plays a significant role. The problem in the historically white university is that Black students have contested subject-positions and their identities are forced to mould to the discourses of inferiority and marginalisation- further perpetuating the already existing oppression of Black women in society.

There is a responsibility for this context to have a consciousness of the discursive conditions that perpetuate the discriminatory contexts of South Africa’s past. It is the duty of higher education to transform, to widen access, and to be allowing of difference so that subjects oppressed by the apartheid regime can find a sense of security within it. Without this the position of Black inferiority is perpetuated and, as a result, so too is the dissent against it.

Methodology

The study used a focus group forum as a means of gathering data on the construction of Black women’s identities within their talk about experiences of the historically white university context, Drawn from across different academic disciplines, three focus groups of five, seven and four women

respectively, were conducted, with these discussions focusing on the participants' educational experiences. The researcher asked open-ended and semi-structured questions, following an interview guideline. Through a brief introduction and a vignette being given to the participants to read, the topic of the women's position as Black and Female in a historically white university in South Africa was foregrounded as the focus for the discussion.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the discussion material. This method describes data through identifying, analysing and reporting patterns found in data. Meaning is then derived from "thematized" and accordingly analysed data, granting a rich and detailed account (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Results

The themes derived from the content of the discussions pertained to the discourses available to Black Female students in the historically white university in informing their identity constructions. Four processes within the historically white university served to inform the women of their positions: A sense of alienation; the silencing of the Black Female voice; lack of access to resources; and non-acceptance and having to conform.

A Sense of Alienation in the Historically White University

For many students a sense of inferiority results because of different experiences of education prior to the university experience. The historically white university makes for a completely different cultural experience; through language, behaviour and dress, adding to an experience of entering into a new world where one does not fully belong.

Participant 2: "I remember myself when I got into first year, straight from Limpopo. You don't know what (university) is like. You don't know what to expect. The dress sense is different. The English is different. You feel like this is survival of the fittest and you are not going to survive. The next person sitting next to you doesn't look like you. You have been in a school where they teach you English in Sepedi; they teach you maths in Sepedi. So you get to (university); everything is in English, the first time you've ever been taught by a white person. So it was challenging."

Bulhan's (1980) concept of "cultural in-betweenity" enlightens this experience. The students who have left their home-towns and have moved to Johannesburg, in particular, seem to express this. Their sense of self extends from this position; being between the forces of the dominant culture (the university setting) and their culture's from "back home".

In the above segment the importance of language is again highlighted in that the student's lowered confidence in her English proficiency hampers her confidence and her sense of self in the university setting. The exclusionary elements of the institutions are evident in this (Mabokela & Mawila, 2004).

Furthermore, there is a lack of support for students transitioning within the institutions. Due to this a sense of alienation in the university environment for some students is enhanced. It heightens an awareness of difference and not belonging, which one must "survive". For other students, an easier settling into the university culture is possible.

It is a disservice to the South African population that students "acculturated" (Bulhan, 1985 as cited in Stevens & Lockhart, 2003) already through well-funded, former "Model C" schools or private schooling have an easier transition into the higher education setting. This communicates that certain identities are required in order to succeed academically, whilst others will result in failure.

It is imperative that, through language, representation and curriculum, the diversity of South Africa be evident in education for this sense of alienation to be addressed. In the absence of interventions, the result is a persisting sense of displacement both in the case of those who adapt and mould to fit the dominant culture, as well as those who struggle to adapt.

The Silencing of the Black Female Voice

A significant theme raised was a lacking representation of Black females. Most experienced by post-graduate students, who observe that historically white university allows for the sense of the Black female voice being silenced through its lack of representativeness at this level. In this segment a post-graduate student, being the only Black female at her level in her department, expressed her frustrations with her field of study. She expressed being barred from tackling particular subject matter that would be relevant and meaningful to her and her experience as a Black female.

Participant 6: " I'm doing my masters right now and it's been, you know this whole thing about...; I'm quoting her (*vignette*) saying that suddenly she felt that she was not knowledgeable because now she found herself in this dominantly, pre-dominantly white... department. I can relate to this, it's something that I'm battling with right now to the level where I've had to adjust my study area...the kind of research I wanna do because it doesn't fit their ideas of knowledge and what is, what is seen as being worth looking at, you know what I mean..."

This student expresses that her interests and ideas are not seen as of value. This contends with her sense of self. What matters to her is integral to her identity and not being allowed to explore it undermines it. In the following segment an undergraduate participant relates her experience of the material provided in her curriculum.

Participant 7: "I can relate to that...Ya. ... in my first year, you're doing literature and ... 80% of the work are from ... white writers and 20% of the work is from Black writers. It's strange because when you look at... when you look within the country it's probably like 50/50 so why can't it be 50? And most of the work is European, why can't it be African? It's very hard to identify with that kind of stuff, ... I can't identify with a white man living in England when I'm a Black girl living in South Africa."

Although her projection of what the statistics are may not be accurate what is important is her sense of not being able to relate to the material provided. It has a significant impact on the students' sense of their place in the university. The emphasis on it being "very hard to identify with" asserts a sense of an effort put in by the Black women to find themselves in their work, but struggling to do so. The experience describes the oppressiveness of a curricula lacking representativeness.

Non-acceptance and Having to Conform

In the educational setting, as is informed by discourses of non-inclusion and non-acceptance within this context, the women sacrifice elements of self in order to conform. The students expressed a requirement to adapt, narrated here through the experience of adapting to the English language.

The dominance of the English language communicates a lesser importance and worth of, and non-acceptance of other languages. A sense of loss is expressed in the compromise involved in adjusting to and acclimatising to the English language as the women do not experience a reciprocation of this compromise.

Participant 3: "Ya, I think what's worrying is that we as Black people or Black women, we always have to be accommodative to the...to the different race and what not. You know we always need to be understanding, always speaking English with them. Why don't they get, why don't they adapt to our, you know, our living. We always have to be adaptive to their living, which I think is not fair. And we, we actually make ourselves vulnerable to them. We actually allow them to treat us in that way. (What) if I'm gonna be with you and I'm gonna be like you know what, *ke Motswana*, *ke Mosotho* (I'm a Tswana, I'm a Sotho)? Either way you must learn my language. I think you need to be just as willing ..."

The student brings to light how a significant effort is involved in transgressing one's mother tongue. She says that through this we "make ourselves vulnerable"; and illustrates how an adaptation of

language in the historically white university, in social and formal interactions, is an act of self compromise; a sense of being stripped of an element of identity. She asserts the necessity to insist on speaking her mother-tongue, that it is important that others be willing to compromise too.

The power dynamics involved in the process of compromise for the students is seen in the next segment. Ignorance towards the cultural and language disparities is seen in the formal setting of lecture rooms and corporate environments. As described by this participant, it is communicated that Black students' languages and their names have less of a place in the historically white university than those of white students. The participants then explored how Black women alter themselves in response to this.

Participant 4: "I had this teacher in first year, Ms B. She'll know ... Daniel, she'll know Ethan, she'll know...and (with) a Black person she's like 'Uh, girl in the pink top'. I'm like why can't you ask her by her name? You know Daniel or Ethan and if it's like a Black person 'Ya, person in the yellow cap there'. And I'm just like, I was so angry cos I'm just like, you don't even take the time to ask me what's my name. You don't even try to like, learn my name. You know?"

Participant 5: "And you get like Black people changing their names. You know like altering their names. Instead of Neliswa, I'm Nelly. *Angu Nikiwe* (when she is Nikiwe), you're Niki... So you're trying to accommodate them! Ya. (Laughter) ...I'm Puppy..."

The anger raised by participant 4, in response to Black African names not being respected versus white names, is significant. Her assertion is that the lecturer does not "take the time" to learn them, so as to be able to pronounce them. It is imperative that at historically white universities, people in positions of power within them (such as lecturers) in particular, become cognisant of what is communicated by this.

The gap, raised by Kader Asmal, between the ideal mandated of South African higher education institutions and what is reality (Walker, 2005) is clearly illustrated by this narrative. Inclusive cultures are required within historically white universities in order to instil a sense that all people are welcome. Part of reaching this goal includes an acceptance of diversity in language and cultures in lecture halls and other places of interaction.

Lack of Access to Resources

The Black women participants in the focus groups reflected on how a lack of access to resources affects their study performance. The intersection of class with race and gender in subject positions is apparent in this theme.

In the following segment the participant explains, using a hypothetical example, that it is because of White students' "father's" ownership of businesses, and Black students' lack thereof, that Black students are outperformed. White students' easier access to certain resources is viewed as an ownership of them (or their families' ownership of them); following a discourse of their superior status attained from their families and networks.

Participant 1: "If we're given an assignment, they offer up much better ... because of printing, because their fathers have printing companies, and say you are offered a task where you have to pull a design, a certain structure... Black people normally come back with a structure that they built with, boxes of Kellogg's and this and that and that; whereas white people really come with nice corrugated structures, well built...it intimidates you. Because you didn't cause it to be like that, it's from your background. Your father didn't offer you, or they didn't have the resources enough for you to be able to maintain those things in varsity whereas for *bona* (them) it's quite easy... And they don't complain about money... whereas if *wena* (you) you're a bursary student or something like that, you can't really go all out on your school work".

A sense of powerlessness in this is evident in how the student puts forth that "you didn't cause it to be like that". Because of this lack, students are unable to "offer up" as well as white students in the requirements of the university.

A view that despite, gender or race, access to financial resources has a significant impact on University life was raised in all the discussions. This participant expresses this view in asserting that all "children" born of financial privilege are more prone to success in university.

Participant 2: "Children born from rich families are more likely to succeed, but when you're poor, you really have to struggle in order to find your riches, and most people just drop out because it's just too much".

A sense of struggle and defeat is linked to the position of "poor" students and that of ease and achievement to "rich" students. The class subject position of being poor results in a "struggle" identity. One has to "struggle" in order to succeed.

In the Historically White University, for many, success is not found. In South Africa, and resultantly in higher education institutions, the majority of the “poor” are Black. The inaccessibility of certain resources makes for a tumultuous university experience which for many Black students results in dropping out.

Letseka & Maile (2008) reported that, according to The Department of Education, 50% of students dropped-out during the course of their studies (30% dropping out in their first year). Furthermore, the Council for Higher Education released a report in 2013 stating that the completion rates of students were stated as being 50% higher for white students compared to non-white students (Murray, 2014).

Discussion

The arduous process of Black women’s identity is perpetuated in the historically white university context due to differences between them and white or “rich” students, they feel inferior. Aspects of class dynamics are described as ‘access to resources’ afforded by more affluent students further enhances the inferiority felt.

Within the historically white university context, thus, the discourses informing their subject positions inform marginalisation and inferiority (Few et al, 2003). The historically white university has therefore not accomplished the ideal of being a completely non-sexist and non-racist environment (Mabokela, 2000). The women’s experiences of lack of access, conforming, alienation and being silenced thus describe a marginalised position in the historically white university.

The poor representation of Black women in these institutions, particularly at post-graduate level further enhances the alienation of Black women in historically white university. Steele (1997) professed a particular requirement of identity in order for academic success. This is that an individual must regard academic achievement as part of their personal identity.

For this to occur, “interests, skills, resources and opportunities to prosper” as a result of their achievement must be attainable in or through the academic domain (Steele, 1997, pg. 613). A sense of belonging as well as the availability of role models in the domain is thus of great importance.

In order to succeed in the historically white university the women choose some subject-positions over others (Walker, 2005). Conforming to the primacy of the English language, and ways of expressing themselves that are informed by white standards is as a result of the exclusion of Black cultures, languages and ways of being. This further describes how the university setting requires the student to relinquish their cultural identities in order to succeed (King, 2001).

Conclusion

This study showed that socio-historic discourses manifest in identity. South Africa is a particularly special case. The historically white university is not, and cannot be, removed from the discursive conditions impeded by the country's apartheid history. The historically white university context is found to perpetuate the discourses of the past, and students' identities within the historically white university setting are consequentially influenced by this.

The reflections of the women involved in this study brought to light a trend that had been beneath the surface of the current student uprisings. These movements are not spontaneous flare ups but rather as a result of discord that had been defining the experiences and identities of students in historically white universities for many years.

Inclusive cultures are required of the historically white university in order to instill that all peoples are welcome. In the absence of inclusive cultures a discourse of supremacy of those cultures that are allowed for is asserted. The result is a perpetuation of Black inferiority (Fanon, 1986, as cited in Durrheim & Mtose, 2006).

Subjects are marginalised and their positions in the historically white university demand that certain parts of themselves be changed or moulded; for example in response to the experience of the dominance of the English language in the historically white university and having to adapt. Students make sacrifices, at the level of self and identity. Aspects of self are compromised, or surrendered, in response to the tensions and conflicts experienced.

Recommendations

As Potgieter & Moleko (2004) purport the lack of implementation of "transformative policy initiatives" in historically white university ought to be addressed. It is the view of the researcher that three areas, namely representation, support and inclusivity, are to be the vehicle towards this.

In representation, an aim to increase Black female faculty within historically white universities as well as the admission of Black students at post-graduate levels should be mandated. It is important that the Black Female voice be heard and represented, and that Black Female students have role models to aspire to. With an increase in representation of Black Females in higher levels in the academy, the propensity for a legitimate place of the experiences, opinions and cultures of Black women will be made possible.

Secondly, more supportive structures for students are required. This would be achieved through further efforts in assisting students struggling financially, and greater access to resources. Furthermore, students also need to be supported in the transition from secondary to higher education.

Thirdly, a more inclusive culture is required in historically white university as well as an effort on the part of the universities to be more accepting of difference and diversity. Part of reaching this goal includes an acceptance of diversity in language and cultures. Through inclusive curricula, and institutional practices more conscious to the realities of the majority of the student populations transformation can occur.

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