

Abstract

This study explored the stories of South African black female postgraduates, in particular, focusing on family dynamics in their childhoods and the role these relationships played in their academic development. South African higher education is a site of contestations as access opens up for students previously excluded from universities. However access and success continue to be racialized and gendered hence black women are unevenly represented in higher education particularly at postgraduate level. This study brings forth stories of women who have succeeded in this context, exploring questions of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1994). Thematic analysis highlights predominant themes across the narratives of these women. There is a very strong thread across the narratives that these women feel that their academic achievement is primarily due to hard work and a 'natural' or intrinsic intellectual talent that was recognised by their families and teachers from a young age. Despite the emphasis on individual aptitude, the findings also highlight participants' recognition of the value of support from family in their schooling and even continuing into their lives as young adult postgraduate students. The nature of family dynamics in these women's childhood and adult lives was revealed, including, the friendship that characterises daughter-mother relationships, the absence of fathers, and the role of grandmothers and other members of the extended family and community networks . It is worth noting that all participants talk of the sudden movement from public township schools to private or Model C schools that disrupts their narratives of schooling. The lack of reading in the childhood homes of some of these women contradicts the common assumption that a reading home environment is vital for the development of the appropriate cultural capital necessary for academic success. Instead, it is evident that these multigenerational families provide a range of support that allows learning to take place, including emotional and financial support, providing critical social capital.