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ABSTRACT - A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO WHITE STUDENT IDENTITY IN RELATION TO THE STUDENT MOVEMENT OF 2015 AND BEYOND

This project focuses on the narratives of white students at South African universities at the time of the rise of the student movement in 2015. Nine post-graduate white students were recruited through snowball sampling. Interviews were mostly unstructured although they each followed a similar temporal movement that included past and present experiences as well as imagined futures. The study primarily made use of narrative inquiry as a way of collecting and analysing the data.

The stories collected showed that the movement came as a shock for the majority of participants, which highlights a significant rift between black and white students. Although students study in close proximity to each other, realities outside the classroom reflect much greater distance in experiences that continue to be shaped by both race and class. Participant accounts showed limited understandings about the daily struggles that many black students face. Furthermore, white students appear to take their places at university as assured and tend to take these positions on meritocratic grounds. The movement has been synonymous with change and many students described having being transformed in some way as a result of choosing to be involved in the protests and related events or vicariously through friends, media and being on campus. However, although participants reflected on their privilege and their understandings were shifted through the events of student protest, the data also suggest that many white students feel alienated from the movement, the student community at large and even the country and are experiencing a general sense of disrupted belonging.

While perspectives are changing and white students on the whole appear to be integrating more inclusive orientations, it should also be noted that the study found 'whiteness' to be resistant to change and the unsettling of white identity is a layered process. Apparent progress is coupled with underlying layers of exclusionary thinking and ostensibly subtler forms of racism and ignorance. Moreover, there are also varying degrees that white students want to turn toward their ignorance, if at all. It is encouraging that the majority of participants in this study were at least beginning to question their privileged social positions and the historical moment they find themselves in.