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Towards a Social Realist Framework for Analyzing Academic Advising in Global South Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Academic advising is a proven high-impact practice, shown to have the potential to help increase students' prospects of academic success, increase their sense of belonging and integration at their institution of higher learning, and provide unique insights into the lived realities and experiences of higher education students. For this reason, advising can be seen as a transformative activity within the student support space in South African higher education institutions. As a practice and profession, advising has existed in the Global North (GN) for decades. However, in South Africa – a developing country in the Global South (GS) – academic advising remains a nascent field. Consequently, the overarching ideas that inform academic advising in the South African context (both theoretically and practically), tend to be drawn predominantly from the GN and more developed countries. The unchallenged acceptance and tacit dominance of theoretical perspectives and practices from these countries can be considered problematic. This is largely due to differences in the socioeconomic, cultural, and historical contexts of students attending university in GS countries like South Africa. This paper works towards developing a conceptual framework, informed by social realism, for analysing academic advising in GS contexts. It is the anticipated value of a GS framework for analysing the emergence of academic advising in South African and similar contexts that is the core contribution of the paper.

Keywords: academic advising, global south, student success, transformative practices, social realism

The South African higher education sector has been grappling with poor throughput and high attrition (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Lourens, 2020), massification (Hornsby & Osman, 2014; Boughey & McKenna, 2021), and funding constraints for more than a decade (DHET, 2010; Scott, 2016; Simkins & Task Team, 2016, p. 75). Students transitioning from secondary education to university are often underprepared for tertiary studies (Scott et al., 2007), with factors like academic literacies (McKenna, 2010), uneven secondary education, and a range of structural and material constraints (de Klerk & Dison, 2022) contributing to challenges with persistence and dropout. While the dominant narrative in the literature, mainstream media, and on campuses often implies that success or failure is inherent to the student (McKenna, 2013), thus decontextualising them from the complex social realities that characterise the sector and the country more generally (Boughey & McKenna, 2016), we strongly reject this line of reasoning.

Rather, we align ourselves to the counter narrative that: i) views students (both individually and as a collective) as complex social beings who cannot be decontextualised from the social realities they bring with them to campus (McKenna, 2013; de Klerk, 2021); ii) acknowledges the influence of South Africa's complex past on the tertiary learning experience of many South African students today (Badat, 2015; Scott, 2018; Boughey & McKenna, 2021; de Klerk & Dison, 2022); and iii) seeks to elucidate and find solutions to the underlying mechanisms that bring about these emergent properties (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). In this paper, we argue that authentic Global South (GS) models and perspectives of academic advising have the potential to advance these objectives. Congruently, we offer a conceptual contribution to the knowledge base about advising in South Africa, by outlining our proposed framework for analysing academic advising in GS developing country contexts.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

Academic advising is a high-impact practice (Moodley & Singh, 2015, p. 95; Strydom & Loots, 2020), shown to have the potential to help increase students' prospects of academic success (Surr, 2019, p. 9), increase their sense of belonging and integration at their institution of higher learning (Masika & Jones, 2016; Strayhorn, 2019), and provide unique insights into the lived realities and experiences of higher education students (de Klerk, 2021). As a practice and profession, advising has existed in the Global North (GN) for decades, with a wealth of literature documenting its evolution during this time (e.g., Beatty 1991; Tuttle 2000; Zhang and Dinh 2017; Mann, 2020). In the United States of America (USA) advising has a footprint dating back to the 1970s (Beaty, 1991; Miller & Miller, 2022), with an established professional body (NACADA), an annual conference, and a peer-reviewed journal in place. These scholarly structures serve to lend gravitas to the profession, while helping to create and sustain communities of similarly minded individuals, working towards researching and enhancing academic advising (Miller & Miller, 2022). In contrast, advising remains an emerging field of practice in South Africa (Obaje & Jeawon, 2021).

Mention of academic advising appeared for the first time in the South African higher education literature as recently as 2009 (Hay & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009, p. 17). These references are brief and usually buried in among (con)texts where the focus is not on advising. Yet the impetus had been established. By 2015, academic advising was being

practiced at some South African universities (de Klerk et al., 2017), although it was not yet called that *per se*. Shortly thereafter, in 2018, a critical mass was beginning to form, sustained by a South African project called the Siyaphumelela Project (Tiroyabone, & Strydom, 2021). Through this project, a working group with members from several partner institutions was formed, with a professional learning certificate for academic advisors and a national professional body for academic advising to follow in due course (Tiroyabone, & Strydom, 2021).

Since 2020, literature on academic advising in South Africa has begun to emerge (e.g., Moosa, 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; van Pletzen et al., 2021; de Klerk & Dison, 2022), which we argue indicates a significant shift towards broader adoption of advising as a student success practice within the country, while also lending greater scholarly gravitas to it. However, much of what has been published is based on GN models of academic advising and while we do not argue against adopting these well-researched and established approaches, we contend that authentic GS (and in this case South African) models and approaches to how academic advising is conceptualised, implemented, and practiced, are necessary.

GLOBAL NORTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH

The rise of academic advising in South Africa is an example of an established GN practice being adopted in a GS context. While there is an abundance of literature with a range of perspectives on the GN / GS debate, what is of greatest importance to our argument in this paper is the dual presence of the social and economic imperatives (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, p. 9) within the South African higher education context. Leibowitz et al. (2015, p. 316) explains that South Africa, as a GS country, experiences fundamental resource constraints when compared to countries located in the GN (i.e., the economic imperative). However, this is not what distinguishes South Africa as a GS country (many other GS countries experience similar resource constraints). Rather, it is the collective presence of both the economic imperative and the social imperative that results in the unique contextual realities found in South Africa.

The social imperative (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, p. 9) pertains to matters of equity and transformation. In South Africa, the present-day realities in the country are still closely tied to its apartheid past (Badat, 2015). One current example of how this coupling of imperatives plays out in the country's higher education sector to this day, is the student accommodation crisis (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019; de Klerk & Dison, 2022). Students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds[1] (the social imperative) are unable to afford private accommodation in metropolitan areas where most universities are located (the economic imperative). Thus, students from privileged backgrounds who can afford private accommodation are disproportionately privileged, when compared to students whose families have not been able to escape the systemic hold imposed by the apartheid regime (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019). This is but one example of the unique social realties of South

[1] Within the South African context, defining disadvantage can be complicated (Badat, 2015), especially when considering the interconnected nature of political and economic factors with racial discrimination and segregation during apartheid (Waetjen, 2006). While democracy was realised in 1994, the legacy of the apartheid era still ripples through current-day South Africa (e.g., Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019), which remains one of the most unequal countries in the world (Posel & Rogan, 2019).

Africa as a GS country and it is because of the social imperative (coupled with the economic imperative) that we draw on social realism to guide our work.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This study is informed by Margaret Archer's seminal work on social realism (see, among others: Archer, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2005). In drawing on Archer's social realist theory, we acknowledge that her work is considered predominantly GN in nature. Over the last four decades, she has evolved her theorisation by drawing on her experiences of the higher education sectors in France and the United Kingdom. However, it is this focus on higher education that has often seen Archer's work being adopted to explore the complexities and history of the South African higher education sector (e.g., Leibowitz et al., 2015; Boughey & McKenna, 2021; de Klerk, 2021). For this reason, we deem it appropriate to use social realism as we work towards developing a conceptual framework for analysing academic advising in GS contexts. The ultimate purpose is to create an analytical tool for understanding advising in a GS country like South Africa, underpinned by the tenets of social realism.

While Archer's *oeuvre* is expansive, we draw specifically on her work around analytical dualism. This allows researchers to separate the parts from the people (Archer, 1995, pp. 15, 165-194), more commonly known as the study of structure, culture, and agency. On the one hand, analytical dualism allows one to consider structure or culture or agency as autonomous emergent properties. On the other hand, it allows researchers the ability to observe and study the interconnection of any one of these with any other, or even the interconnection of all three. Gaining insights of this nature aids researchers to better understand how structure, culture, and agency operate, whether independently or interconnectedly. This in turn can elucidate enabling and constraining factors that has bearing on the social phenomenon under study. In this paper, we use academic advising as an emerging field of practice within the South African higher education context as the phenomenon the framework would serve to study.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this section we introduce our social realist framework for analysing academic advising in GS contexts. Figure 1 below summarises the key factors seen as contributing to the emergence and development of South African academic advising, as a set of practices based on contextual needs and influences. For the purpose of this article, the framework has been presented in a distinctly comprehensive manner, thus allowing for the incorporation of a range of relevant details with regard to how academic advising is envisioned to have developed within the South African higher education context, and how to understand and analyse this development. Figure 1is followed by a series of sub-sections that discuss the various dimensions comprising the framework.

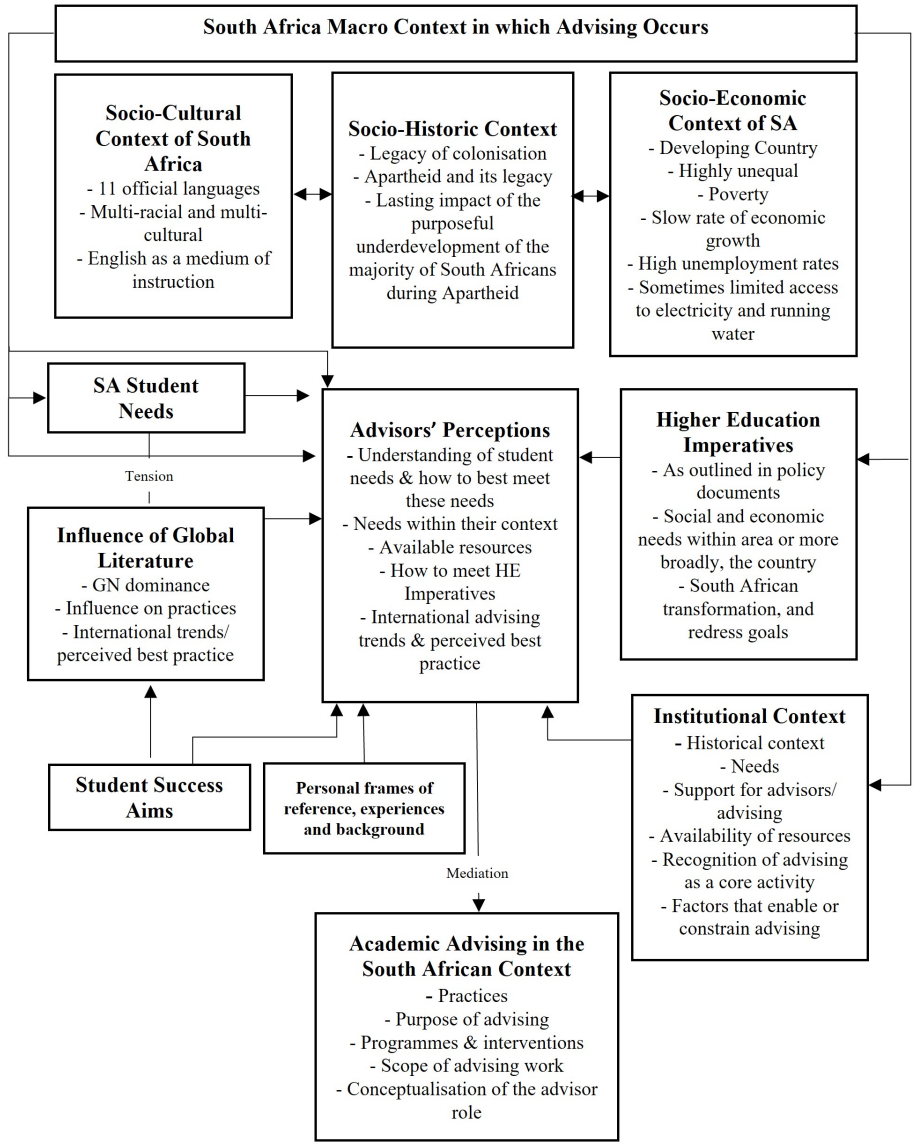


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for analysing the emergence of academic advising in South Africa.

The Macro Context in which Advising Occurs

The macro context (Figure 1) forms a critical basis for understanding the emergence of academic advising in South Africa, as well as how it continues to be shaped. Here the socio-cultural, socio-historic, and socio-economic contexts within the country are of particular importance. In South Africa, the social dimension of these contexts must be recognised and acknowledged, as cultural, historic, and economic factors cannot be separated from the social context and reality of the country and its higher education sector (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Ultimately, academic advising has emerged in particular ways in South Africa as a response to social imperatives.

Within our proposed framework, these contexts hold significance for several reasons. Firstly, they can be used as a key point of differentiation between developed and developing countries' contexts. They describe the circumstances within the country in which the education system itself, and by extension advising, is situated. Secondly, information on the macro context can also provide insights into the needs of the students who will be entering the higher education system, and whose needs advising must meet (de Klerk, 2021; de Klerk & Dison, 2022). Lastly, they provide a basis for the development of academic advising practices, which will emerge in particular ways to meet the needs of the higher education system, as well as the students within that system. Consequently, the framework allows researchers to hone in on relevant parts within a particular context, while at the same time being able to explore contexts in relation to one another, to ultimately analyse and make meaning of the emergence of different forms of advising.

The Socio-Economic Context

The history of South Africa, one of colonisation and then the minority rule system of apartheid until the cusp of the 21st century (Badat, 2015), has resulted in a socio-economic context with high levels of inequality (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019; Posel & Rogan, 2019), a largely dysfunctional basic education system (CHE, 2013; Scott, 2018), and a divided higher education system that some have argued continues to perpetuate past inequities (Badat, 2015). The legacy of this systemic oppression and purposeful underdevelopment means that some South Africans are disproportionately privileged, while others have been unable to escape these systemic inequalities (Badat, 2015; Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019; Posel & Rogan, 2019; de Klerk & Dison, 2022). These realities permeate all parts of South African society, including the higher education sector, despite continuous transformative efforts (Badat, 2015). Academic advising cannot be separated from these realities.

Another characteristic of South Africa as a developing country in the GS, is that its socio-economic context is characterised by slow economic growth, with high levels of poverty and unemployment (Posel & Rogan, 2019; Moyo, Mishi & Ncwadi, 2022). There are varying levels of access to basic amenities, such as water and electricity. As a result, levels of access to and within higher education institutions also vary, with a range of socio-economic factors affecting the higher learning experience of many students (Badat, 2015; de Klerk & Dison, 2022). Concomitantly, the South African higher education funding crisis (Simkins & Task Team, 2016) can create additional barriers to student success, a reality that plays out in the advising space (de Klerk, 2021; de Klerk & Dison, 2022). The framework (Figure 1) serves as a tool for disentangling these socio-economic complexities

in relation to academic advising, and the way it has been and continues to be shaped within the South African higher education context (or similar GS contexts).

The Socio-Cultural Context

Like the socio-economic context, South Africa's socio-cultural context is an important descriptor of the country, especially from a social realist perspective. South Africa is culturally rich and diverse, with many different racial, ethnic, and language groups. This diversity in the social context contributes to an incredibly enriching cultural context. Each ethnic and language group has their own practices related to forming and working with knowledge (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). However, within the cultural sphere, there are certain cultural practices that are dominant within the education system that serve to perpetuate inequalities, by upholding exclusionary structures that seem to conflict with the broader socio-cultural context of South Africa. This includes English being the dominant medium of instruction across the country's basic education system, while most South African universities remain predominately English-speaking, western-oriented, middle-class institutions (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Consequently, students who enter the higher education system from these types of backgrounds, and who possess the requisite 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1976), have a distinct privilege and advantage over those who do not. By maintaining these structures and culture, higher education institutions can perpetuate inequalities by privileging certain ways of working with knowledge over others. These contextual factors will inevitably influence the country's development goals, and subsequently higher education imperatives. We argue that academic advising as a field of practice cuts across these areas and can help realise meaningful and sustainable change, with the proposed framework serving to support analyses of the relationship between advising and these areas.

Higher Education Imperatives[2]

The macro context in which the South African higher education system is located sees both social and economic imperatives (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) manifest within and influence higher education institutions in this GS country. Higher education institutions carry the immense burden of making significant contributions to the country's knowledge society, economic upliftment, and development goals. This latter point is related specifically to the belief that development is linked to education.

The White Paper transforming higher education (DE, 1997) acknowledges the systemic inequalities that needed to be addressed after the fall of apartheid and outlines the role of higher education in transformation (also see Badat, 2015). This includes redress, the democratisation of the education system, contributing to the social, cultural, and economic development of the country, and the provision of good quality education (DE, 1997). These goals are directly linked to addressing the inequalities of the past which, unfortunately, still manifest within the sector today (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019; Boughey & McKenna, 2021; de Klerk & Dison, 2022). To meet these imperatives, higher education

[2] Here we acknowledge that, despite national imperatives, policy work, and prioritisation to advance research collaboration between and among African and GS countries, the South African higher education sector remains predominantly Eurocentric in its epistemology (Heleta & Jithoo, 2023).

institutions should have mechanisms in place to address the need for equity, transformation, and redress. In South Africa, academic advising has arisen as a means of supporting universities to work towards these goals (de Klerk, 2021; de Klerk & Dison, 2022).

The Institutional Context

The institutional context in which academic advising is practiced can play a significant role in how it is conceptualised and implemented, which can either serve to enable or constrain advising practices. For example, the availability of resources such as funding and institutional support for advising activities plays a key part in how it is integrated into the broader academic project and can affect its potential for enhancing students' prospects of success. In recent years, the South African higher education sector has seen a reduction in government funding and subsidies, which (when combined with massification) has resulted in universities having to reduce spending where they feel it is not needed (Boughey, 2010; CHE, 2013; Moyo & McKenna, 2021). Thus, the resources available for academic advising activities can serve to indicate whether academic advising is recognised as a core activity within an institution or not.

The history of an institution may also influence how academic advising is perceived and enacted, because it provides a basis for understanding the structures and culture that are upheld within the institution. During apartheid, universities were racially segregated and sometimes culturally segregated (Waetjen, 2006; Badat, 2015). Conversely, today every South African has equality of access to higher education institutions in theory. However, the extent to which transformation has occurred, where universities enact systemic change to reform exclusionary structures and culture, can affect the ways in which academic advising is practiced and the work of advisors within institutions. The framework we share in this paper can serve to help delineate these dimensions of institutional context, which in turn could help elucidate and eradicate barriers to the full realisation of the change-potential advising brings, while at the same time supporting the implementation and integration of advising within an institution.

Influence of Global North Literature

As mentioned, literature on GN advising practices is abundant due to the length of time that advising has been practiced within the GN (Beatty, 1991; Miller & Miller, 2022). Therefore, what has emerged from these contexts can provide a robust foundation for academic advising within GS countries where advising is still in its infancy or where it has not yet begun to emerge. While it must be acknowledged that student success and persistence is the aim of advising in both GN and GS contexts, there can also be tension between what is seen as 'best practice' within GN literature, and what is needed from advisors and advising in GS contexts similar to that found in South Africa. There is also potential tension between the needs of students within South African higher education contexts (de Klerk, 2021; de Klerk & Dison, 2022) and what may be presented as the best way to meet student needs within GN advising literature. The conceptual framework (Figure 1) could help ease some of these tensions, while also supporting further development of contextually relevant and responsive GS advising models and approaches.

Academic Advisor Perceptions

Advisors could be considered the keystone of this framework. As integral decision-makers and agents in the provision of academic advising, and often the creation of advising programmes and services, advisors mediate the factors mentioned above to help shape academic advising within their institutions (de Klerk, 2022).

Advisor perceptions of the macro context in which they are situated can be seen as having significant bearing on how academic advising emerges within institutional spaces. Congruently, advisors' perception of student needs within these contexts (which may differ from students' perceptions of their own needs), their interpretation of higher education imperatives, the allocation and use of resources, other enabling or constraining factors, as well as how they are positioned within the institutions where they work, can all influence how academic advising manifests within different spaces. Here it must be acknowledged that advisors' perceptions and how they come to understand and mediate these various influences and factors on their practice, are formed by their own experiences and backgrounds, which means that the decisions they make are underpinned (at least to an extent) by their own experiences and worldview. Yet the views and perceptions of individual advisors may not be entirely accurate, is inevitably susceptible to bias, and could be seen to have blind spots, simply because their experiences are subjective. The framework presented here has been designed to account for these realities.

Academic advising eventually emerges in the form of particular practices, definitions of the work, scope and functioning of advising, as well as how the advisor role is conceptualised within specific institutional contexts. In this way, this framework (Figure 1) has the potential to be a powerful GS tool with which to analyse the emergence of different forms of and approaches to advising in a variety of GS contexts. It would allow researchers and practitioners a means with which to delineate potential factors perceived to influence how academic advising is (and could be) practiced, the needs advising may (have to) fulfil, and the role of advisors in mediating all these influences and demands to produce particular forms of advising. Additionally, it would enable the user to outline and explore the myriad interconnected contextual factors and imperatives that shape GS higher education contexts like that found in South Africa, and which in turn influence how advising manifests in these contexts.

WHY THIS FRAMEWORK?

We are scholars working within the South African higher education sector, with direct ties to the way in which academic advising is practiced and implemented at the intuition where we work. Moreover, we contribute to national debates and initiatives currently shaping the emergence of advising in the country, while also contributing to the scholarship of academic advising in the country. We contend that, as part of the GS, it is imperative to develop practices that are tailored to the needs of South African students, advisors, and the South African context. As we have shown in this paper, using the emergence of academic advising in South Africa as an example, there is an urgent need to further explore the complexities that hold bearing to advising in developing GS contexts. This is necessary to distinguish between what works in more developed contexts, and practices that are appropriate for developing GS contexts such as that found in South Africa.

Adopting GN approaches that are well-researched and informed by experience is a good starting point for South African advising. However, there seems to be a tendency within South African universities to try to keep up with international trends, while overlooking the nature and urgency of the needs that exist within them. There is a danger in tacitly accepting GN perspectives as 'the right way' or 'the only way' (Collyer, 2018) in which academic advising can be structured, enacted, and practiced, because developing countries within the GS have different needs, resources, and experiences. There is an urgency for a more critical approach to be taken, both in terms of accepting and adopting practices that work within GS contexts, as well as developing distinctly GS practices for developing contexts. Ultimately, we argue that it is vital to forge a distinct GS identity for academic advising, with the framework we present here having been designed to serve that purpose.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

In this paper, we propose a social realist framework for analysing academic advising in South Africa, but which can be adapted to other GS and developing-country contexts. Academic advising remains an emerging field within the South African higher education sector and is an example of an established GN practice manifesting in a GS context. Numerous challenges resulting from the dual presence of the social and economic imperatives (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) in the country influence how advising is conceptualised and implemented. The framework presented here has been designed to help delineate these challenges, with the aim of supporting responsive and transformative approaches to advising for the context in which it is practiced. However, further research is necessary to assess the accuracy and relevance of the framework within GS contexts.

Social realism tells us that there are things beyond what we can possibly know at any given moment (Archer, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2005), which means that there are potentially relevant layers not yet mentioned or explored in this iteration of the framework. To this end, further work on testing and refining the framework is necessary. One possibility is to use the framework to analyse empirical data on academic advising from South African higher education contexts. This is something we are currently planning to do yet perspectives from across the diverse South African higher education sector are necessary if the potential of advising is to be realised in full. Another area of further research is for the framework to be used by other GS scholars to test its accuracy and critique its relevance. Finally, a third area of research could be for scholars from other GS contexts to adapt the framework in such a way that it accommodates contextual (or other) factors relevant to their own GS advising and higher education realities. In conclusion, this GS framework for analysing the emergence and implementation of academic advising in contexts similar to that found in South Africa is intended to help advance advising as a field of practice in the GS, and by extension transform for the better the student higher learning experience in these contexts.

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