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Leading article

Experiences of black women teacher educators in the South African higher education system

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Abstract

The documenting of black women's past and current experiences within academia remains important despite the apparent opening up of opportunities for the formerly excluded. This is due to the need to confront the twin edifices of domination and marginalisation arising from the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Within the context of discourses on transformation, it is critical to take stock of the extent to which universities have created supportive and enabling environments that take account of the diverse and unequal backgrounds of their academics – especially women. This introductory article serves to initiate aspects of the debates that inform the narratives of a group of black women academics who are university-based teacher educators and to raise questions about their positioning within tertiary institutions which remain relevant even under a democratic and inclusive dispensation.

Keywords: black women, academics, identity, narrative, teacher education, South Africa, university

INTRODUCTION

This article reflects on the narratives of a number of university-based teacher educators in South Africa by drawing on some of the themes emerging from the articles they have contributed. We argue that black women academics show resilience and determination to succeed in academia in the face of historical, systemic and cultural barriers. Although the term 'black' refers to persons of coloured, Indian and African descent, all the contributions in this edition are by black African academics. The extent to which most black women academics in South Africa survive and progress is testimony to their individual agency. In this introductory article, we firstly make a case for the relevance of the focus of the special issue. Secondly, the article introduces the broader theoretical and methodological context anchoring

the individual contributions. Thirdly, we provide a synopsis of the individual contributions.

RELEVANCE OF THE FOCUS ON BLACK WOMEN ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES

A special issue which focuses on black women's experiences within academia 20 years into South Africa's democracy might be questioned. Such questioning might arise out of the presumed homogeneity of racial and gender experiences within the university, so that black women academics' experiences might now be considered a non-issue. However, the historicity and contingence of black women academics' personal experiences necessitate ongoing interrogation and understanding of the effects of the nexus of power and identity on academic progression and success. Failure to focus on their specific challenges would be a form of silencing that obscures and isolates them, thereby rendering them invisible and powerless (Howard-Vital 1989).

Narration, which is adopted as a predominant approach in the individual articles, involves a significant amount of intellectual and emotional work as part of identity construction and deconstruction. While a significant number of black women academics have succeeded within universities in Africa in general and South Africa in particular, the ongoing need to document their experiences is a legitimate process that contributes to 'an Afro-centric feminist epistemology' (Collins 2000 in Potgieter and Maleko 2004, 84). This can never be a once-off event. Potgieter and Maleko (2004, 84) argue that 'black women are not taken seriously (or given adequate support) as producers of academic knowledge ...' and the persistence of unequal racialised and gendered power relations necessitates ongoing interrogation, which is best captured through individual narratives.

The university, like any institution, is a contested space in which a multiplicity of issues relating to perceived and projected academic identities emerge. Issues of identity and difference are not peculiar to the African university. Identity in academia is intimately connected to qualifications, perceived capacities, roles and responsibilities. How identity manifests or is manipulated is linked to barriers or enablers of success. Voice discourses are one way in which objectification, assimilation or marginalisation within the university can be exposed, interrogated and resisted. Voices, though, are embodied in the persons who are historically and contextually located, and are therefore subjective. They cannot just be analysed theoretically, but need to be engaged with empirically and contextually.

In this special issue, black women teacher educators' experiences are located within one university in South Africa. While the issues they raise might resonate with other discourses of marginalised academics in other universities across the country and the continent, it is the vantage point of being in South Africa which gives 'insider' perspectives on the issues raised. Since academic identities are always under construction and deconstruction 'in contexts that are complex and indeterminate',

characterised by struggle, contestation (Fitzmaurice 2013) and an uneven playing field, the reflections captured here can at best be the starting point for debate.

The narratives point to multiple ways of seeing and understanding the dynamics at play within the university. The impetus to narrate the experiences arises from the need to document personal stories as well as from a realisation that individual stories articulate with bigger (perhaps more encompassing) issues. In line with Wolcott (1988), we suggest that such a story should make a point that transcends its modest origins and that within the story we can discover unique reasons for being (Young 1996). The complexity of presenting experiences and feelings while showing some level of critical reflection is evident in the stories. Below, we briefly explain narration as our methodological choice.

NARRATION AS CHOICE OF METHODOLOGY

The narratives in this special edition combine social and academic experiences that have shaped black women's identities as learners, professionals and academics in different historical epochs and locations. Reflection involves the use of theoretical frameworks that shed light on experiences anchored in wider historical, political, social, economic or academic configurations. The narratives are presented in the form of auto-ethnographies. The ethnographic narrative or creative non-fiction is not only a complex methodological approach which suggests a commitment to the subtleties and complexities of experiences, but also has the potential to evoke rigorous and therapeutic dimensions. The rigour arises out of the processes of telling a story or selecting and citing relevant critical incidents in life experiences that are capable of generating new knowledge and practices. Story-telling is therapeutic as it unburdens the stress and anxiety that arises from being 'Othered' in ways that undermine the qualifications and experiences the individual brings to the academic space. There is a potential health risk to the challenges that are documented. Some of the narratives suggest coping mechanisms or strategies which might prove critical for successor generations of black women academics.

Fitzmaurice (2013, 615), after Clandinin and Connolly (2000), describes how 'narratives begin with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals'. Thus, they are appropriate for studying either a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals because they simultaneously give a voice while enabling a reflexive process of identity construction in the socio-cultural context of institutions. The voice enables the narrator's epistemological and pedagogical views to be constructed and articulated in a research writing process that seeks to 'make sense of experience' while 'constructing and communicating meaning' (Fitzmaurice 2013, 615–616). While the narrations might reveal underlying pain or concerns from perceived or real continuities of marginalisation, they present an opportunity to adopt a reflective stance as narrators engage with the past, present and an imagined future in which the subject is not a mere object or victim, but has agency. Herein is an opportunity to utilise lessons of the past to act in the present to impact the future.

Narratives as a form of writing are both experience- and research-near. They make the impersonal research orientation of academia personal. However, at another level, a narrative approach raises questions about the objectivity of knowledge generated from what could be considered a highly subjective process. The reflective narration of experience is an attempt to present the subjective in an objective manner. It is acknowledged, though, that this form of research is seldom valued (Clandini and Connelly 2000).

A self-study methodology looks backward to allow movement forward, and in the process allows an understanding of identity while interrogating that of the other. Such self-study has the potential for harnessing internal resources either to resist or transcend imposed limitations of the present as one seeks to engage fully as a member of the community of university academics. The central explanatory framework of domination and marginalisation within education in general and universities in particular lies in the power–knowledge nexus where race, class, gender, age and nationality interact and shape personal narratives.

While history has shown that the best qualities of certain universities in South Africa were their opposition to apartheid, and spearheading change and transformation, some of the current interaction practices among academics can be viewed as patronising and therefore as perpetuating forms of domination and marginalisation while appearing to include. This paradox shows how the university is a microcosm of the larger society and that 20 years into the democratic dispensation, it is also grappling with issues of racial and gender inequality.

Given the objectives and effects of both colonial and apartheid education, black women academics often come from under-prepared and un-resourced backgrounds, and after being 'allowed' into the academy, they may experience marginalisation and isolation. They also find themselves burdened with administrative tasks which do not count towards tenure or academic recognition. As such they act as the handmaidens of their more capable colleagues. This erodes time to engage in meaningful research activities for which there is also a general lack of support or mentorship (Howard-Vital 1989, 187).

Contestations and contradictions within the field of university education reflect the residual effects of power or powerlessness, domination and subordination within the cultural order of institutional structures and processes. While black women academics' identities inevitably influence how they experience these university structures and cultures, the complexity of the location of teacher education within the university may compound these identity crises.

Teacher education within university education

Fitzmaurice (2013, 613) argues that 'universities are complex and disparate organisations where different constructions of "academic" coexist'. He notes that the relocation of teacher education from teachers' colleges to the university has added 'complexity and multiplicity' to the identity constructions of the 'newer', (and in this case, black woman) academic. Carrim, Postma and Christie (2003) highlight

the tension that emerged due to such a merger between the Johannesburg College of Education and the University of the Witwatersrand. They note how each of these institutions 'was given assumed values of being more academic and theoretical than the other' (Carrim et al 2003, 203). Although perceptions are said to have gradually changed, the issue of academic status 'remains a matter of serious concern' (Carrim et al 2003, 203). Some of the narratives in this journal provide evidence that the sources of the enduring tensions and concerns are diverse. Among them are the binaries of theoretical and practical orientation to teacher education; the balance between teaching and research; and the hierarchy arising from qualifications.

Teacher educators who graduated from colleges usually qualified first as school teachers and taught in schools. Thus, they bring with them to the university professional experience and expertise in teaching (Murray 2005). Unlike their counterparts in subject or disciplinary departments, they have usually entered academia without a doctoral qualification or a track record of research and publication. What it means to be a teacher education scholar in a university which emphasises and recognises research and publication more than it does teaching, leads to multi-layered sources and experiences of marginalisation and exclusion in the academy. The academic prioritisation of and emphasis on research rather than teaching by the university is perceived to undermine prior academic identities anchored in the professional knowledge base of teaching. To compound this problem, mentorship in research that focuses on developing a scholarship of teaching and learning is not always readily available (Loughran 2011; Murray 2005). Socialisation into a community of practice is necessary for providing critical 'unambiguous, supportive and highly salient scripts ...' as Simmons et al argue (2013, 11).

Janus-headed nature of teacher education

Sources of the conflict of identity for black women teacher educators also arise out of the Janus-headed nature of teacher education programmes, that is, they look to both university and school-based teaching experiences. There is a sense in which the former college lecturers are perceived by their counterparts (those teacher educators who have always been university based) as a-theoretical, lacking in a research culture and with a modus operandi based on passing on the 'tips and tricks' of the trade to students. Loughran (2011, 280) describes how the 'archetypal image of an academic as a theoretician can be equally powerful in shaping a teacher educator's approach to, and perceptions of, their identity'. These perceptions may reflect the theory–practice binary which leads some teacher educators (and not just black women) to describe themselves as being 'mere practitioners' as they evaluate their identities against the theory and research-oriented identities of colleagues who have always been university based.

Teacher educators in general struggle for academic recognition within and outside the profession. Murray, Swennen and Shagir (2009, 31 in Loughran 2011) summarise this struggle for teacher education's legitimacy within higher education as follows: 'In some countries the field of teacher education has been measured against

"traditional" academic disciplines and found wanting. The struggles for legitimacy have occurred in part because the knowledge base of teacher education is what Furlong (1996, 154) calls the "endemic uncertainty" of professional knowledge.'

By virtue of the quality of education received under colonial and apartheid education, and as a result of having been previously located in teachers' colleges, black women teacher educators bring to the university a complex interplay of race, gender and status. This is likely to be a huge albatross to shoulder as the narratives in the current article reveal. But in spite of these challenges and stressors, the university is a place where all who meet its entrance requirements for study or work can claim a space. Hence, the transformation of the university space to reflect diverse groups of academics is inevitable in any democratic country.

Diversity, transformation vis-à-vis redress and equity

In view of South Africa's unique historical conditions, the double imperative of redress and equity appears to be on a collision course with the need of the university to be competitive in terms of research and publication output as well as academic excellence. Transformation, diversity, access and academic excellence, as defined by research outputs, are key drivers of the university globally. At the institutional strategic management levels, universities appear to face a dilemma between simultaneously embracing a transformation agenda while being elitist in their aspirations. This dilemma is compounded by the fact that the inclusion of the previously excluded is not always matched with a leveraging of adequate resources and lead time to support staff development. The need for top notch researcher academics appears to fly in the face of the need to open up access to certain designated groups. It is in the context of these contradictory imperatives that black women academics in South Africa are expected to forge their path.

The imperatives of transformation, redress and equity on the one hand, and the need to be competitive and research intensive on the other, create dilemmas for universities. As a result of these dilemmas black women academics, especially those within schools of education, are positioned in conflicting ways.

The narratives in this special issue document tensions arising from personal, institutional and political transitions. These transitions provide a 'liminal' zone or location (Little and Green 2012; Simmons et al 2013, 11). In this zone, an individual experiences tension which comes from both external and internal sources, in the process unsettling his/her identity.

The following themes, amongst others, are engaged with in the current issue: agency, perseverance and persistence; paradox of transition and transformation; continuities of disadvantage in academia from apartheid to post-apartheid; womanhood, motherhood and late entry into academia; language in education; academic migration; contradictory expectations; epistemic injustice; making choices; resilience and assertiveness; mentorship; and coping strategies.

Given the focus of the special issue, two strong identity markers, namely race and gender, are evident. Some of the narratives do not always theorise experience, while

others engage with the theoretical implications of critical incidents. What is critical in either case is the emergence of voice and an opportunity to interrogate academia.

A SYNOPSIS OF THE INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Mathagka Botha's article 'What were they all about: Two questions that provoked a different reaction and feeling' grapples with the question of the legitimacy of her academic identity and invokes the concepts of 'agency' and 'ownership', either to contest or to affirm simultaneously either negative or positive perceptions in order to develop her own identity. She demonstrates how Bantu education is implicated in the current positioning of black women academics and how current practices and attitudes within the university continue to represent challenges that black students and black academics encounter. After identifying mechanisms of silencing, intimidating and being rendered invisible within the academic space, she eventually develops 'agency' and 'ownership' of action which enable her to persevere and persist.

Sebolai Mohope's article 'Becoming a new kind of a professional: A black woman academic caught in transition' explores how democratisation in South Africa led to the transformation of former higher education institutions (HEIs), with doors opening for those formerly excluded. Her narrative suggests that some have experienced transformation as merely cosmetic because practices of overt and covert marginalisation and exclusion have remained entrenched in institutional cultures. Black women academics in these supposedly changed HEIs have encountered various obstacles and barriers while attempting to develop professional and research identities. Mohope's narration of her move from a formerly black university to a formerly white, one first as a student and then as an academic staff member, reveals how transformation processes have taken hostages along the way.

Thabisile Nkambule's article 'Against all odds: The role of "community cultural wealth" in overcoming challenges as a black African woman' uses community cultural wealth as a theoretical/analytical framework. She describes the challenges she experienced as a school learner, an undergraduate and postgraduate student, and as an academic–challenges which are socio-cultural: under-preparedness for a university's teaching and learning culture; feelings of being undermined as a black African lecturer; and discrimination and stereotyping of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This article demonstrates the continuities of institutionalised disadvantages for black students and lecturers within the university and offers some strategies for dealing with them.

Audrey Msimanga's article 'Too late to come back? The paradox of a being a fifty-year-old "early career" black female academic' focuses on 'the challenges of joining academia after a career break'. She revisits and reflects on the challenges of negotiating the tensions of being a mother and an academic who happens to be a black woman–identities whose demands are described as being 'out of joint'. Interestingly her simultaneous experiences of 'being on time and being too late' are two sides of the same coin; hence, her metaphor of 'flipping the coin'. It is

a toss-up whether a person is born white or black, male or female, yet that very identity can determine the nature of the challenges in the person's academic path. Msimanga's narrative is both a knowledge and a pedagogic resource for negotiating entry, re-entry, survival and growth in academia. Given the changing demographics in South African universities, this article provokes questions such as: Is it desirable or advisable to join the university 'late'? How is lateness defined, and by whom?

Mary Madileng's article 'Critical reflections on experiences of discrimination, disrespect and disregard on the formation of professional identity' documents her journey from being 'a rural primary school learner to university lecturer' in South African schools and universities. These experiences, she argues, have shaped her current 'professional' identity, oriented towards a determination and a moral disposition to guide, respect and support all students. This professional identity has been 'constructed and reconstructed' through social interactions and engagement with peers and students as she experienced various forms of discrimination, disrespect and disregard. Critical reflection on these negative experiences gave her a 'voice' to articulate her story and to choose pedagogical practices that empower her and the students she teaches, regardless of socio-economic background. The negative experiences have become generative of alternative forms of engagement that resist epistemic injustice.

Nokulunga Ndlovu's article 'Turning adversity into opportunity: A black woman's journey into academia' focuses on the challenges faced in two educational fields or contexts, namely, a high school and a university, leading to the formation of a habitus characterised by resilience and assertiveness. Her narration focuses on her experiences as a Zulu First Additional Language teacher in a previously white suburban high school; her positive experiences as an undergraduate student in a BEd Honours degree programme; and finally her experiences as a teacher educator. The choices she made created pathways and possibilities for her academic development and success. This success is also partly attributed to supportive mentorship.

Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga and Audrey Msimanga's article 'The contradictory location of the black woman passport academic in South Africa: Embrace, alienation and vulnerability' narrates the experiences and perceptions of inclusion and exclusion within university practices based on nationality, ethnicity and race. The insertion of nationality as an additional identity marker exposes different interactive dynamics that lead to perceptions of contradictory expectations and a consequent identity crisis by 'passport academics' within the university in South Africa. What emerges is the paradox of the clamouring of a transformation and diversity agenda within the university which seems to be struggling under the weight of a nationalistic turn. The article suggests the urgent need to recover the 'academic' from the 'passport academic' for a productive focus on the core business of the university, which is academic engagement in ways that benefit all.

Eunice Nyamupangedengu's article 'Finding a voice: Reflections on a long journey from silent student to confident teacher educator' focuses on the challenges of learning and teaching in an English Second language (ESL) classroom as a learner,

teacher and teacher educator. Language as a barrier to cognitive development and learning in Africa is a critical and perennial issue that vexes policy makers and educators alike. This article raises pertinent issues that relate to how cultural capital (and specifically linguistic capital, as reflected in one's habitus), enables or constrains one's success. The lack of English communicative proficiency effectively silences one's voice in the classroom and the workplace. This article subtly documents the clash of cultures – the rural home African indigenous culture and the imposed school English culture where, for different reasons, both environments proved hostile to attempts to speak in a specific language.

Nyamupangedengu's article also raises pertinent questions for the African university where poor 'lexical competence in the language of instruction' affects not only a person's academic success and engagement in communities of practice, but his/her destiny as a member of the human race. Language can effectively work not only to silence, but to exclude millions of people who could generate knowledge from education and intellectual engagement.

BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES: A CONCLUDING COMMENT

There is a motif running through the issues and challenges articulated in all the articles. The sources of the challenges experienced are historical, socio-economic and political, and these affect academic identity formation as well as the terms of participation in the communities of practice (Wenger 1998) where situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) is supposed to occur. Learning as 'legitimate peripheral participation' in a functional community of practice for 'new' or 'early' career academics ought to be distinctly inclusive, leading to 'transformation and development of identities' (Wenger 1998, 13). Marginalising practices are not and should not be confused with 'peripheral participation' as the former deny access to practices that lead to valued competencies and identity. Marginalisation leads to pain and struggle while attempting to succeed on an uneven playing field. The articles reveal that the sources of powerlessness or feelings of exclusion and frustration are multiple, but the roles of race and gender loom large. While the gender variable does not emerge consistently in the articles, one of the articles brings in nationality as another identity marker which, when aligned to race, offers interesting and pertinent insights into the power of the race variable.

It is evident from the narratives that the challenges of intellectual engagement in the face of gate-keeping practices about what should be taught; how it should be taught; and by whom leads to domination, control and exclusion. While the identities of black women academics within the university are similar, they are not homogenous. The narratives not only retrospectively bring to the surface aspects of the history of education in South Africa, but afford clarity on, and give voice to, a range of various national, historical and political legacies. These legacies, in education in general, and in academia in particular, like most fields of human endeavour, are characterised by contestation, marginalisation and in some cases outright condescension of certain

groups towards others. In this context, the temptation is to overlook what a person has achieved and to focus on the barriers to success. While highlighting the challenges they have faced, it is evident that writing has enabled the writers of the articles in this issue to reflectively interrogate the structural realities that convey negative messages to black women so that they are able to re-articulate and represent them in ways that redeploy power. While inherited systemic socio-economic inequalities and the continuity of structural inequalities, (as well as overt or covert exclusion), explain the experience of academia as a struggle, the narratives show the enduring determination of black women academics to succeed against all odds – a determination rooted in their history and socio-cultural backgrounds which clearly resonates with their academic experiences.

The narratives' focus on struggle demonstrates the difficulty of tracing an individual's history and reflecting on his/her measure of success when the dominant impression and experience is that of ongoing struggle. The narratives evoke a difficult past, a challenging present and yet also an extraordinary position of strength and success that is not always acknowledged. Indeed, the narrators appear to be located in 'liminality', which Meyer and Land (2005) describe as a '"liquid" space, simultaneously transforming and being transformed by the learner as he or she moves it' (Simmons et al 2013, 380). It is a transformation zone in which a person can look backwards in order to move forward regardless of the barriers and challenges, always on the threshold of being in becoming. Finally, these narratives can be understood as a reflection of presences and absences that are either valued or perceived as a threat or that lead to feelings of inadequacy. Yet, they offer insights into what the university leadership could do to address inherited paradoxes if diversity and transformation are to go beyond adding numbers to providing support and mentorship so that more black women academics move into the higher echelons of academia.

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