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Multicultural influences on the personal identity of University students

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ABSTRACT

The transition to higher education is a complex period for most youth that challenges them to constantly negotiate their identities. In the university campus, students interact and socialize with students from diverse cultural backgrounds and they are confronted with reflecting on their existing attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours. The current study aims to understand how different cultural values and beliefs may influence the personal identity of students in a multicultural university. This study employed a qualitative research approach. The study employed an interpretive research design which entailed conducting semi-structured, individual interviews to collect data. The participants were 6 second year students enrolled in the Humanities faculty, who were purposely selected at the University of the Witwatersrand. Thematic analysis was employed in analysing the data. The specific thematic analysis method employed was interpretative phenomenological analysis, in which the focus was on understanding how students make sense of the experience regarding being in contact with other students from diverse backgrounds. The findings of the study show that students identify with different social structures, thus maintaining multiple identities in diverse setting of the university. These identities are found to be dominant in contexts in which they are established. The findings show that students maintain a positive self-concept, which is contributory to how they adjust and find belonging in the university environment. Belonging was found to occur within the student cultures inherent in the university setting, such as leisure activities, religious involvement, and other activities of entertainment on campus. Religion emerged as the dominant influence on the personal identity of the majority of the participants; however, other students highlighted other social structures as contributory factors as compared to religion. Parental involvement and childhood experiences continue to influence students' negotiation of a personal identity in the university campus. In conclusion, based on the findings of the study, it is clear that students embrace the diversity within the university campus, while maintaining connections with identities that existed prior their time spent in university. This is a clear demonstration of the continuity in identity formation and belonging in the social setting of Higher Education.

Keywords: multiculturalism; personal identity; student culture; University climate; values and beliefs