



This is the post-print of Ismail, S. 2011. Researching transformation at a South African university – ethical dilemmas in the politics of representation. *Studies in Higher Education*. 36(3): 275-289. DOI: 10.1080/03075070903545066.

It is made available according to the terms of agreement between the author and the journal, and in accordance with UCT's open access policy available: <http://www.openuct.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/UCTOpenAccessPolicy.pdf>, for the purposes of research, teaching and private study.

Researching transformation at a South African university – ethical dilemmas in the politics of representation

Salma Ismail

Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7700, Cape Town, South Africa

This article focuses on the complexity of researching institutional culture and the ethical dilemmas posed in representing staff according to race and gender, drawing on three qualitative studies undertaken at a previously white South African university between 2000 and 2007. During the research process, issues of representation became a concern both for participants and the researcher; specifically, some participants contested how they were categorised in interview transcripts and draft articles. Based on the empirical data of the three studies and using critical social theory and constructionist, feminist and post-colonial critiques, this article asks whether researchers can describe the lives of others without violating their reality, and argues for ethical representation that allows for advocacy and empowerment.

Keywords: transformation; representation; research process; ethics; victim; equity

Introduction

This article focuses on three qualitative studies of transformation undertaken at a previously white South African university in 2000, 2002 and 2007 (Ismail 2000, 2002, 2007). The first study (2000) was a university-wide study exploring the university community's experiences of institutional culture, with specific focus groups chosen by gender and race. The 2000 research was requested by the university's Institutional Working Group which reported to its Institutional Forum. The Institutional Forum is an advisory body to Council and represents all stakeholders of the university, including trade unions.

The 2002 study in the Health Science Faculty included staff at all levels and of all designated categories and both genders, as defined in the employment equity legislation. Employment equity policies are forms of redress which favour the employment of black people (African, Coloured and Indian), white women, and the disabled, labelled 'designated categories'. This study investigated black, female and disabled staff members' everyday experiences of institutional culture in the Health Science Faculty. In addition, senior white men considered to be key figures in the Faculty, who had engaged in issues of transformation and thus could provide insights into policy decisions, were also interviewed. The 2002 study and subsequent 2007 follow-up were undertaken at the request of the Health Science Faculty Transformation Committee (TC), who set up a working group consisting of the Transformation Manager, the chair of the TC, two faculty members and myself.

Email: salma.ismail@uct.ac.za

The first two studies were informed by the low numbers of staff in academic posts from the above-designated groups, in particular black and disabled staff in senior positions; low numbers from these groups who were applying for promotion; the small number of female staff in academic posts, especially at senior level; the slow advancement of black staff; and the high turnover of the few black staff members that were employed. The aims were to identify institutional barriers which might impede the recruitment, retention and advancement of designated staff.

Figures quoted from the Employment Equity plan for the Health Science Faculty in 2001 illustrate the extent of the disparities. In terms of race, African staff were severely underrepresented, with the largest concentration of African staff in junior research (59%), of which 9% were African women. Most Coloured men and women were found in administrative posts as departmental assistants or in administrative support jobs, and of the 46 professors only nine were black (African, Coloured and Indian). White women comprised the bulk of the staff, but were outnumbered in senior positions by white men at a ratio of 3:1. Staff with disabilities that could be traced totalled 52. The quantitative data reported highlighted the need for research which described the subjective experiences of staff from the designated groups.

In the 2000 and 2002 studies, the overall conclusion reached from a comparison of the themes in the findings was that designated staff's perceptions and experiences of institutional culture were predominantly negative, and for many staff, transformation of the institutional culture was an imperative to address historical imbalances, promote equity, and remove racially discriminatory practices. The 2002 study identified some of the ways in which the institutional culture, personal, social, or historical factors perpetuated and contributed to negative work experiences. This study also brought to the fore the reluctance of disabled staff to identify themselves as such, as well as their low level of participation in these studies (in both research studies [2002 and 2007] the same disabled staff member presented for interviews), therefore this article does not comment on the views of disabled staff. The 2002 study formulated a number of recommendations to redress inequity, and to make suggestions as to how institutional culture might be changed to support current transformation objectives. The 2007 follow-up study in the Health Science Faculty explored how transformation strategies informed by the 2002 study had influenced the institutional culture, and whether they had contributed to positive or negative experiences for black and female staff. The research showed that important positive shifts in collegial and professional development, management style and changes in student profile had impacted positively on institutional culture.

This article discusses issues of research process and representation in qualitative research methods, then goes on to argue for a more nuanced conceptualisation of black identity in current employment equity policies. It argues that knowledge is situated and has to take into account context and researcher positionality, and explores an alternative research approach for transformation, one which takes into account empowerment and agency. Finally, it concludes with a brief discussion on the tension between structure and agency which may inhibit change, and the different meanings of transformation.

The institutional context of the university

Some of the other challenges facing higher education institutions, not only in South Africa but worldwide, include financial pressures, public scrutiny, competing values and

the rapid rate of change in the world (see Kezar and Eckel 2002, 435). In South Africa, further challenges are presented by the goals of transformation policies. These goals for higher education include redress, equity and access, and the state is seen as the key driver of changing demographics through employment equity legislation and the national agenda of transformation.

The university in question is a previously advantaged liberal white university and is well resourced. Its legacy draws on British colonialism and it has been criticised for being Eurocentric both in terms of curricula, teaching methods, institutional norms and communication, and how these operate both informally and formally. The institutional culture is often described as chauvinistic, cold and competitive, and is often cited as a barrier to attracting and retaining black staff and students. Other factors which add to the complexity of the institutional culture are a great divide of rank between junior and senior academic staff, and between administrative and academic staff (Ismail 2007). Many black and female staff are employed at the lower ranks in both academic and administrative posts. It is often not easy to isolate discrimination along the lines of gender, race, rank or status as it occurs in multiple layers, but more often than not polarisation is often expressed in racial terms even if it operates on one or more of these levels. Shackleton (2007), in her investigation of gender in a similar case study, concludes that the impact of multiple levels of discrimination on black women in administrative jobs is strongly disempowering and that 'the institutional culture assists in helping them to disappear and a liberal culture makes pushing for change seem churlish' (Shackleton 2007, 40).

Nevertheless, the university's stance on transformation is that equity is inseparable from attaining excellence; in order to realise this vision it has implemented a number of interventions to redress past injustices and to create a more inclusive and enabling environment. These include a more proactive approach to changing its staff composition by the appointment of equity employment representatives on selection committees; supporting active recruitment of black students; and altering its admissions policy to admit more black students. Other interventions include academic support for black students in the establishment of an Academic Development Unit which offers writing support and foundation courses; demonstrating an awareness of cultural diversity by, for example, identifying suitable names for buildings and holding public events for Youth Day and Africa Day, and having an ombudsman function for racial and sexual harassment (Ismail 2007, 85).

The university has also made some more concerted efforts to employ disabled staff and to provide facilities for them. However, this category is small and usually the statistics for disabled staff are incorrect as many do not self-identify with this label. There are also structures in place to oversee transformation, such as the appointment of a Deputy Vice-Chancellor who is responsible for overseeing transformation at institutional level; an Equity Manager who is responsible for monitoring staff demographics and submitting reports to the Department of Labour on equity plans and audits; and a Transformation Manager who focuses on programmes to change the institutional 'climate'. At faculty level there are Transformation Committees that report to the Dean and the Equity Manager, and within the department of Human Resources there is a Recruitment Officer who oversees both the recruitment and interview process with a focus on meeting equity targets.

Research process and representation

Ethical practices

In all the studies, I followed the usual procedures of ethical practice, such as explaining the aims, purpose, and outcomes of the research to all participants and assuring them of confidentiality (this was a major concern for participants and I had to reassure them a number of times that I would keep confidences). Care was taken to remain faithful to the expectations of confidentiality by not using quotations from participants that could easily identify them. Therefore I selected my data very carefully and only included quotations that were sufficiently generic and could not be linked to a particular participant – only then were comments included verbatim. In addition, in the 2002 study I reported on personal prejudices and grievances in a very general way to retain confidentiality. This could have minimised the impact of the pain experienced by participants in having to read and relive their experiences, as well as on other readers, making the experiences of those concerned less negative than they were. I received ethical approval from the relevant research ethics committees, and each participant signed a consent form and read and gave feedback on interview transcripts, pre-final reports and articles.

Thus the ethics practised here was situated; I did the expected, and was local and specific to the university context. I was requested to undertake the research because I am an active member of the university's transformation committees where I advocate for more inclusive employment practices. In addition, I ran diversity training workshops for the Health Science Faculty Transformation Committee. Therefore I was not perceived as neutral by either the Health Science Faculty Transformation Committee or the participants and I hoped that the research would provide possibilities for change. I therefore had to respect the integrity of participants as I came to the research with a 'fair degree of moral reasoning' and had to take into account 'the multifaceted and conflictual nature of the experiences of the participants' (Simons and Usher 2000, 3). I had to be 'constantly vigilant and reflexive, to adopt a critical approach that did not disarm my analysis or leave the research open to many interpretations' (Cameron et al. 1992, 1). In the end I reasoned to use the ethical principles as guidelines, since ethics cannot be divorced from 'the agency of the individuals who interpret them and are disconnected from power relations in whom the research is embedded' (Simons 2000, 54).

The impetus to write this article came from 'an ethical moment' (Simons and Usher 2000, 1) in the research process that was not purely concerned with the function and application of ethical codes and principles of practice but a call for deconstruction, which is itself an ethical practice, both for the researcher and subjects, as both are involved in producing knowledge. I reasoned that the knowledge was produced in situations where the aim was that of exploring what reality could become rather than simply explaining what it is, and thus that ethical decisions were more dependent on sensitivity to people and politics than they were on ethical principles and codes (Simons and Usher 2000, 1–11).

The disquieting moments that arose in the fieldwork and in the analysis of these studies raised issues that are complex and have occupied me for a long time, as they are not restricted to research but also to activism within the university with regard to greater equity, change in staff demographics and institutional culture. In the research literature, issues of research process and representation are usually kept separate. Process is associated with methodology and issues of ethics and confidentiality, while representation is usually linked to the findings and analysis; however, in my study

they were deeply intertwined as historical representation of identity was one of the reasons for participation in the studies. This article will reflect on some of the ethical dilemmas as presented in the research.

During the research process, issues of representation became a concern for participants and the researcher. Some participants contested the way that the sampling was framed, and their biggest concern – particularly in the Health Science Faculty studies – was how they were represented in interview transcripts and draft articles. I encouraged dialogue and engaged with their concerns and, although the final article met with approval from all, I was left with some vexing questions concerning the politics of researching transformation, as well as the ‘politics of the research process itself’ (Cameron et al. 1992, 1) and the way the studies were framed. The article will draw on the empirical data of the studies and use critical social theory (Alexander 2002) to examine these concerns around representation, in conjunction with a cautious and critical use of postmodern theory (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Lapping 2008), as well as constructionist, feminist, and post-colonial critiques (Cameron et al. 1992; Patai 1991; Spivak 1994) to ask whether researchers can describe the lives of others without violating their reality, and to argue for ethical representation that allows for advocacy and empowerment. Exploring issues of representation, researcher positionality, empowerment and agency in research is not new, but the ways that these issues played themselves out were of particular interest to me as my research set out to address social justice issues.

It may seem obvious that advocacy and empowerment should be fundamental to a study of transformation and even though many of the participants felt a sense of relief at having an opportunity to express their feelings, they expressed an uneasiness with the impact of the research as they had been interviewed previously on transformation issues and felt nothing had come of it. The slow pace of transformation and the contradictory nature of implementing equity (for example, the university had made equity posts available but often these were not offered as permanent posts), added to their feelings of powerlessness and increasingly they felt that change would only occur if management were held accountable and penalised for not meeting targets through performance reviews.

Politics of representation

The most significant criticism was directed towards using designated categories. This was raised by participants as an issue of sampling and expressed in this way: ‘Because you have designated categories for the interview groups, i.e. “white women” that set the tone for the issues that emerged’ (Ismail 2002, 9). Some participants responded to this critique, feeling that ‘[t]he issues were very sensitive and they came because they felt that perhaps the institutional research working group who was overseeing the research could make an impact on the university’s transformation policy’. Another member of the institutional research working group felt that ‘[s]elf-selection is not ideal. The positive side to self-selection is that those who came forward will have thought about the issues, and have something to say. Pressurising people to participate may not have the same results’ (Ismail 2002, 9).

In the 2002 Health Science Faculty study this critique was expressed as, ‘[b]ecause there was purposive sampling stratified by gender, race and ability the data presented could not be generalised to the designated categories’ (Ismail 2002, 12). I had some concerns about using this framework, as the categories used for

distinguishing staff provided by employment equity policies produce their own tensions and contradictions, as illustrated in the findings. One example of this is that staff members in designated categories become stereotyped and are seen as victims or people to be acted upon. Their individual identities are subsumed by the assigned categories and agency is taken away from them. This critique and the literature reviewed (Morley and Walsh 1996) called for the addition of social class as a descriptor to illuminate hidden power relations and to explain the slow progress of change in institutions. The addition of class, it is argued, would enable one to explore the intersections of class, race and gender relations – constructions of identity which are interwoven in the South African context (Alexander 2002).

The above criticism was expressed by black men, who spoke at length about their autobiographical journey into higher education, feeling that this journey had been hard and had steeled them for conditions at the university, but that the continued use of employment equity policies, 'which is about doing something to someone' sometimes made them passive (Ismail 2002, 49). Black men also complained about the inclusion of white women as equity candidates, pointing out that white women come from the same advantaged social class as white men and do not necessarily work to change the institutional culture. There is a general perception amongst many staff that white women have benefited most from equity policies and in this way both the status quo and institutional culture have remained unchanged. The statistics show that more white women are appointed and promoted than black men or women. The figures in the employment equity progress report to Council show that in 2006, 37% of appointments were white women, compared to 26% of appointments going to black individuals, inclusive of women and men. Figures on promotions of academic staff by merit (ad hominem) in 2006 show that 15 white women were promoted, five black men and no black women (Hall 2006). Even after making allowances for the above figures to be contextualised against staff composition, it is still of concern that no black women were promoted or that so few black women put themselves forward for promotion.

In all three studies, white women indicated that they saw equity policies as a corrective to their gendered socialisation which prepared them for submissive roles and contributed to a lack of self-confidence, non-assertiveness and an inability to self-advertise; these factors, they argued, had contributed to their slow career advancement. They did not perceive any active discrimination against them for being part of employment equity policies. Some of them considered employment equity policies as a bureaucratic measure to increase the number of women in higher education. There is an institutional silence when questions are posed as to whether white women should be part of employment equity policies since their numbers have increased significantly both in senior academic and management positions. Both black and white women complained about the bias in the institutional culture that assigned them nurturing roles, the lack of recognition regarding interruptions in their career for reproduction, the excessive time demands and the masculine culture where overwork and workaholism are considered the norm.

Many black women said after viewing the second draft report that they did not want to be portrayed as victims. They had come into the faculty empowered but their confidence had gradually been eroded; they felt merely tolerated and this had disabled them as active members of an academic community. Others said that equity policies afforded them entry into the institution, but they did not want to be viewed as affirmative action candidates, perceived by others as inferior and selected not on merit but on race.

The following quotations illustrate black staff experiences of the employment equity categories.

I know that I am the language of affirmative action. My post is called a contract development post. And I don't feel that I need development, but at the same time, I'm grateful that there was something that the university created a space for me to find a salary, so to speak. But I don't feel I need development. (Black, male, academic, 2000)

If you going through a process of negation every day of your life here, it can erode your confidence. You get to a point where you say, must I open my room, I'll close it and I'm not going to be told that is stupid or something. You get a lot of paternalism and you feel why I must open my mouth. If you going through that on a daily basis, eventually your confidence erodes (Black, female, academic, 2002)

When black staff are promoted, people will say that maybe it's because you are black that you that you were promoted, when you actually deserved it. So maybe when you are first appointed or promoted, the first thing that people see is your race, and then to that another form of discrimination gets added like language, and after this culture gets added and this is how you are continuously undermined. So it's not like the racism goes away it just takes different forms that is the institutional culture (Black, female, academic, 2007)

As the interview findings reveal, categorisation simultaneously undermines and privileges black candidates and, although staff valued being at the institution, they did not want to make oppression a virtue, nor did they want to be perceived as though they only had one voice – an unintended consequence of categorisation. They wanted their different and changing identities and cultural positions to be reflected, and in the follow-up study in the Health Science Faculty, staff broke the pattern of speaking as 'victims' (Ismail 2007, 94–97), although they did demonstrate their ambivalence about talking positively about changes in the institution, in particular about the overall governance and decision-making (Ismail 2007, 95). These findings suggest that the experiences of black staff reinforce one another and are consistent with Bourdieu's (1990, 56) notion of 'habitus', which explores how social relations within a field are incorporated with emotions, belief and actions which have an embodied history, and it is the active presence of the whole past that is reproduced.

Another concern was that 'black' is used to refer to African, Coloured and Indian, as used in the anti-apartheid movements, and the catch-all term failed to represent particular experiences of Coloured or Indian groups that were either advantaged or discriminated against differently to African blacks, because of this sub-category of identification. I also did not include the experiences of white male academics other than the senior leadership; thus their experiences remain hidden and are perhaps subsumed under the stereotype of privileged and positive. In these respects I was guilty of representing staff as victims without agency and possibly subject to other hidden discriminations which did not emerge.

However, taking a postmodern position, I would argue that since the real cannot be faithfully represented, but is always interpreted, there are then always gaps – and that these gaps can be seen as the potential for change. In many instances in my research, the representations of staff views were also representations of oppositions to the system. Designated staff questioned the unchanged interpretations of merit, ad hominem promotion procedures, reward systems and said that the unchanged meanings of these concepts have reinforced the status quo. They were suspicious of the procedures as well as the constitution of these committees and they said that these

processes were controlled by small cliques of senior managers. This is in line with what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) suggest: what is signified at any moment of articulation always has two aspects; one that relates to a particular experience and one that expresses a relationship of opposition to a symbolic system. On further reflection I think that the use of these categories and the assumptions based on these identities would influence the way I as researcher would interact with participants and thereby influence my findings. Thus, taking a fuller account of the selections and omissions produced in my interactions with participants, I agree with Lapping (2008) that the way the study was framed and the process of analysis may have fixed the meaning within my writing and this may have closed down further meanings.

Researcher positionality

Researcher positionality is the subject of a long-standing feminist and post-colonial debate (Cameron et al. 1992; Patai 1991; Spivak 1994) and examines the way in which research is conducted and how social and political positions influences the research. Writing as a black woman, an identity forged in the liberation struggle, and doing research with colleagues in my own institution, I want to re-examine aspects of this debate in relation to research in a changing institutional context and to examine the binary of insider–outsider and its impact on the research. I agree with Visser (n.d., 6) that this binary is highly unstable and is subject to the dynamism of positionalities in time and space, as well as to social and political positioning. At the time of my research, the university was living transformation; it was undergoing major restructuring of faculties and departments, changes in governance, reviewing curricula and had to realign its educational practices to new norms and standards which were circumscribed around performance. Similar changes and reforms in higher education were taking place throughout the world (Kezar and Eckel 2002). In this time of vast change, many staff members were eager to explore the impact of the changes or to speak out about their concerns.

My research included staff at all levels, from junior administrative and academic staff to senior managers and professors. I therefore interviewed across the hierarchy and saw a wide range of individuals. Sometimes I was aware that I was junior and an outsider but I think because I was perceived to be doing moral research most of the participants spoke quite openly and earnestly and saw me as a constructive presence. On reflection, I think that as a black woman with both similar and differing experiences I was an insider that could also offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding, and at times shifted positions to participant or activist or educator – and also to advocate. Being able to identify with injustices could perhaps have restricted my interpretations: I may not have seen beyond defined identities as I had a political interest in the research (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

I did experience tentative responses to my presentations of the 2007 follow-up study and often perceived that it was difficult for me to say as a black person that a white institution has good practices – even though the leadership in the Health Science Faculty had changed to black and female. I think another reason for the cynical responses to the 2007 study was that there was some virtue in black staff having the monopoly of bad experiences even when significant changes were made in employment practices and in trying to change the institutional culture. In the follow-up study, the findings included mainly positive responses as staff reflected on the transformative strategies that had made a significant impact on their professional lives. This study

illustrated that black people were not always victims, can act and may be interpreted differently. I was always aware of the institutional and historical constraints in the fieldwork and recently, because of the low impact of the research, considered both my position as insider (as part of the institution) and outsider, but this has not dislodged me from having confidence in my interpretations of staff experiences.

Research context and framing knowledge

Since the research in institutional transformation was overseen by the Institutional Working Group for the 2000 study and by the Transformation Office of the Health Science Faculty for the 2002 and 2007 studies, all three studies had the dual aims of using the research for the benefit of the participants and the institution, and this was therefore not a neutral enquiry. My reflections will also comment on the questions posed by Clegg (2008) regarding the contexts in which knowledge is produced and how knowledge is framed.

I was aware that within the Health Science Faculty the research ethos was mainly positivist; therefore I made sure that in the qualitative studies I followed a systematic, procedural and rigorous practice (de Wet and Erasmus 2005, 39) and ensured that ethical practices followed the institution's guidelines. In addition, I made transparent my procedures and reflections and engaged with the participants throughout the research process. Being conscious of the research ethos made me particularly concerned with providing evidence that held weight; in this process I may have overlooked evidence that could be criticised as 'exaggerated' and thus could have left out powerful voices that challenge the 'everyday slights and snubs' (Hall 2007, 3). I was conscious that in the Health Science Faculty environment, reporting on emotions and feelings could be 'interpreted as a signal for weakness or pathology' (Jansen 2005, 306) but argued that emotion and feelings illuminated the challenges, relying on the feminist approach whereby giving voice to emotion and experience is valued as the first step towards knowledge production. I saw my task as documenting marginal and silent voices and to argue for an institutional culture that values diversity and strives for changes that reflect different cultural and historical legacies. I used extensive quotations to highlight the oppressive institutional culture – not only was I conscious that the 'subaltern can speak' (adapted from Spivak 1994) but that they are heard. Thus my most important challenge and moral responsibility was how to ensure that voices would be heard, and in the 2007 follow-up study I was encouraged by individuals' willingness to participate and to reveal new and important positive insights, although some were cautious and others tentative.

Drawing on these particular experiences in a transforming context, I think my research was both critical and positive as I tried to go beyond entrenched views of staff and drew attention to representing experience in a context where the power base of research still at times perpetuates colonialist ethics (McKeever 2000, 103, emphasis added). Thus I think my research, which was presented at many fora within and outside the university, returned 'to the bigger questions of social equity' (Clegg 2008, 5) and helped to focus on the challenges and requirements to accomplishing institutional change.

Reconceptualising representations of identity

These disquieting moments in my research led me to question the meaning and usefulness of the designated categories for research. I must state at the outset, lest I be

misinterpreted, that I subscribe to a broad definition of transformation which includes changes to the staff profile to reflect greater diversity, changes to the institutional culture to be more inclusive, and for fair employment practices for all who work at the institution. However, I will argue that we need to review employment equity practices and policies. Firstly, employment equity categories or identities are to some degree 'given' by others – they reduce black staff to stereotypes, as evidenced in the research findings, and are museums of past categories, representing the stable, racialised groups of apartheid legislation. During apartheid, these categories were used to oppress black people and create victims; thus one can say that these categories are infused with negative perceptions as black people as a collective were denied quality education and access to different employment possibilities. Even today it is argued that these categories are used in the interests of the dominant group 'to keep the race and gender categories and that the social product is being distributed by ethnicity or colour' (Alexander 2002, 105). This phenomenon, as Alexander and others across the political spectrum (Chipkin 2008; Ramphela 2008) have argued, in their explanations of the recent (May 2008) xenophobic attacks in South Africa (in which black South Africans in the townships attacked and drove out African foreign nationals), may contribute to destructive ethnic conflicts and fragmentation in post-colonial Africa.

It is now 15 years since the start of democratic transition and South Africans need to continue to re-examine whether the approaches we are using are optimally contributing to building a non-racial South Africa. Uncomfortable questions arise such as, 'To what extent is the racial categorisation in employment equity legislation assisting or indeed inhibiting non-racialism?' and 'Does employment equity legislation really make a difference to employment practices?', when faced with the reality that the university's demographics remained fairly stable from 2003 to 2006, most black staff were appointed to administrative positions, and '40% of all new appointments were white people mostly in academic positions, which is four times the representation of whites in the South African population' (Hall 2006), and more importantly, the retention of black staff has often been poor.

The state and others across the political spectrum (Ismail 2008) argue that affirmative action is an essential part of redress – a mechanism to shift demographics and for the university to be more diverse and representative of the population. However, as illustrated by the empirical evidence, this has created another set of problems as black and female staff are perceived to be appointed on these bases and this partly perpetuates the perception that they are deficient or inferior. This prejudice came to the fore in institutional debates at the university and spilled over into the public domain.

In addition, the categories create a situation of degrees of advantage where according to the legislation, within the equity categories preference should be given to black candidates. For example, if a black man and white woman are both appointable then preference should be given to the black male candidate, since this category suffered most disadvantages under apartheid and would be under-represented in the institution but is the majority population group in the Western Cape. Shackleton (2007) argues that gender, although a named component of equity legislation, is not an institutional imperative and that race is given priority in particular at liberal white universities. However, the statistics as indicated above show that employment practices do not necessarily adhere to legislation. I have experienced in the different transformation fora (Joint Consultative Forum for Employment Equity and the Institutional Forum) that when one questions employment equity practices 'passions are so easily inflamed as these practices have made it into a

sacred practice' (Alexander 2002, 107): to begin to argue for an institutional culture without boundaries means dismantling employment equity practices, and this is interpreted as a reactionary notion. Nevertheless, political and academic leadership need to continue to review employment equity practices for their appropriateness and sophistication. We require a form of redress that should enable a South African citizenship to escape the mind-set or habitus in which identity is reified and to begin again the debate on transformation 'guided by the dictates of equity and democracy' (Alexander 2002, 109). In such a review, space must be given to debate the inclusion of Africans from other countries so that redress is not only for South Africans but for all who suffer the hardships of wars, poverty and colonialism.

Another feature of my research was that it did not question whether the racial categories as defined by apartheid and the employment equity legislation for staff and perhaps particularly for students remained a 'valid analytical unit and whether these categories had lost their power to determine racial identity' (Brunsma and Rock-quemore 2002, 101) as 'black' is perhaps becoming increasingly multidimensional, varied and contextually specific due to economic, cultural and social changes (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2002, 102). Although I am aware that race and class intersect in South African society, and that if you are black you are more likely to be poor and marginalised and at lower employment levels, and that there is increasing poverty, there have been some economic shifts evidenced in the increase of black consumerism, and the number of black students at university and in middle levels of employment. The university's admissions policy requires that students identify themselves with a racial category on their application form as the university strives to change its demographics to include more black students. However, for a number of students the identities 'black', 'white' or 'Coloured' are not personally meaningful. For example, within my own social set we have married across racial, class, and religious lines and our children from these hybrid marriages have, we hope, transcended racial identity and categorisation. Therefore perhaps it is time too that South African social scientists, policy makers, educationists and researchers question whether the identities used in the employment equity legislation continue to be useful social categories, whether these legally and politically imposed identities can be used as statements of self-understanding, and whether they indeed represent empirical reality.

Perhaps we should also shift our thinking from 'Who is black?' to 'What does black mean?' – a question posed by Brunsma and Rockquemore (2002) in their study determining whether the term 'black' can be used as a social category to describe a group of people in an American university. I am sure that these are not popular questions – as pointed out by various black historians and academics, blacks have been defeated for over 600 years; 'why is there this hurry to forget black history just because a few blacks are sitting on top of white supremacist institutions' (Mngxitama 2008, 34). In defence of my argument, I would reiterate that designated categories too quickly cast designated staff in the role of victim and divest them of agency, autonomy, and prematurely prejudice the possibility of fully contributing to the institution. Is it not time to dislodge people's security in their given identities, noting also that the terrain of identity is increasingly multifaceted, fluid and dynamic and the idea and meaning of self is not static but changes with changing identities. As ethnographers have concluded, one cannot reify cultures – they are dynamic and changing; 'people do not hold still for their portraits' but rather, the 'the tapestry is richer on the canvas with time' (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 20).

Future research: empowerment and advocacy

What does the future hold for research which is aimed at transformation? It should more actively challenge rigid categories, not feign impartiality, and open up dialogue and debate acknowledging the power of the researcher. I think that in transformatory research the participants should have a bigger role in constructing the research, and know that the researcher will lose some control over the research and involve the participants in decision-making that concerns them. This will also allow the researcher to confront and challenge participants to strive for greater reflexive agency and assist in renaming identity, rewriting experience and repositioning themselves in relation to the institution (Parkes 2007, 3–12). Reflexive research entails constant reflection on positions of researcher and researched within layers of social relationships, and I think it is imperative that in the analysis of researching for transformation that the researcher finds ways to illuminate and to challenge perspectives. In this way, changes are generated within research and the research is more likely to be significant and have greater political potential for positive changes and construction of new identities. The ethical standpoint utilised has to incorporate the insights of ethics of social justice and rights as well as morals based on care and responsibility (Simons and Usher 2000, 4).

Some analysts like Mngxitama (2008, 34) say they are not seduced by the discourse of empowerment and agency but believe it is a ruse and are suspicious about how one measures 'empowerment', especially 'as our country woefully lacks a critical race discourse' (34). I argue that we need to link the two: a critical discourse of race and employment equity policies and an empowering research practice that will engender agency and autonomy. These thoughts echo Pendelbury and Enslin (2001, 369), who have first argued that 'it is imperative for researchers who are sensitive to pitfalls of paternalism, misrepresentation and betrayal to promote human capabilities, including agency and choice that are necessary for the quality of life of those who have participated in the research', especially if the research is intended to inform public policy. To a large extent that is the critique that black staff made of the institution, i.e. that they are constrained to exercise their agency because they are unsure of when, whom and how to trust (Pendelbury and Enslin 2001).

Tension between structure and agency – meanings of transformation

Drawing on the above analysis it appears that there is evidence that institutions can change, and pertinent to this reflective article is whether the institution can sustain change given the competing demands of the neo-liberal market and transformation (Higgins 2007; Ismail 2007). The tension between structure and agency was most pronounced in the 2007 follow-up study, which reflected the competing policies which management had to balance and implement, such as co-governance and corporate styles of management, 'affirmative action policies and changing the institutional culture which can be readily undermined by the persistence of past prejudices' (Hall 2007, 3). In the 2007 study, while staff had expressed some confidence in the transformative interventions implemented by management, others expressed their dissatisfaction with the pace of change by leaving the institution (personal communication with three staff members who had left). The follow-up study also illustrated that definitions of transformation were not static and had different meanings for everyone. I think that the tension between structure and agency may become more pronounced as corporate styles of management gain ground over competing policies of co-governance. Higgins (2007, 121) argues that any discussion of institutional culture that ignores this

attack on academic work is short-sighted. Therefore it is as important now as it was during the anti-apartheid struggle that staff actively resist and redirect the locus for change away from the new focus of the academic institution on management paradigms.

There is evidence that staff are becoming more politically active, as demonstrated by the strike over salaries by administrative staff in 2006 and the launch of an Academic Trade Union in 2008. In addition, the outsourced workers are also exploring ways to build a stronger trade union to fight for fair labour practices and to hold the university accountable for the implementation of a socially responsible code of conduct. Many of the black, female and disabled staff are active in the transformation fora and also in selection committees, and they have direct experience of the power of institutional process and structures which sometimes undermine their efforts, but they remain steadfast in their vision to make higher education a welcoming place for all (personal communication).

Conclusion

In the revisions and preparation for publication of this article I sent a final draft to a number of university staff members in 2008 for comment – they included staff who had participated in the interviews, senior executive management, senior academic and administrative staff who participate in Transformation fora, staff who are in positions of power in Selection Committees, as well as academic staff who are prominent in these debates. The overwhelming response to my argument was agreement that employment equity policies should be more subtle but almost everyone expressed a danger in this approach, i.e. that any relaxation of employment equity policies which use race as a proxy for disadvantage could derail present attempts to change staff demographics. Other responses were that ‘managerialism’ (as in corporate styles of governance) can be interpreted differently and not necessarily be equated with negative inferences.

In 2009, debates on the current use of race as a proxy for disadvantage for student admissions and the advantages of employment equity policies again came under the spotlight. This was partly due to the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor as a ‘transformation candidate’ who is reviewing equity policies, and a response to black students and staff who claim that the university’s student demographics need to represent those of the nation. The Vice-Chancellor appointed an Admissions Review Task Team which has consulted widely on the student admissions policy. The latest Student admissions policy adopted by senate argues that race should be kept as a descriptor for disadvantage but in future other factors, such as social class, income and schooling should be used in addition to race to determine disadvantage. Similarly, in the Vice-Chancellor’s Strategic Concept Paper on Transformation the overall aim envisaged is to move away from employment equity policies towards non-racialism (Vice-Chancellor 2009). It appears that these developments signal a possible new way forward and allow for more inclusive ways to appoint staff and admit students to the university and a ‘move away from a society in which race determines the worth and character of people’ (Alexander 2009, 4).

In summary then, this article has illustrated the ethical dilemmas posed in representing staff according to race and gender and the complexity of the research process, issues of representation and researcher positionality. Further research on the topic of transformation should consider ethical principles as a guide to research and for shaping researchers’

relationships with participants, and to interrogate researchers' values including how they construct the other. In addition, researchers should strive in both the research process and presentation towards collaboration, cooperation, equality and empowerment, and take into account the feminist emphasis on the personal and the social (Merrill and West 2009, 176–77) as well as their own ideological position.

References

- Alexander, N. 2002. *An ordinary country: Issues in transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Alexander, N. 2009. Great debate on admissions gets underway. *Monday Paper*, May 11–24, 4. University of Cape Town.
- Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brunsmas, D.L., and K.A. Rockquemore. 2002. What does 'Black' mean?: Exploring the epistemological stranglehold of racial categorisation. *Critical Sociology* 28, no. 1–2: 101–20.
- Cameron, D., E. Frazer, P. Harvey, M.B.H. Rampton, and K. Richardson. 1992. *Researching language: Issues of power and method*. New York: Routledge.
- Chipkin, I. 2008. The curse of African nationalism. *Mail and Guardian*, May 30–June 5, 28.
- Clegg, S. 2008. Forms of knowing and academic development practice. Think piece for Higher Education Close Up Conference, June 26–28, in Cape Town. <http://www.closeup4.uct.ac.za>.
- Clifford, J., and G. Marcus. 1986. *The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- De Wet, J., and Z. Erasmus. 2005. Towards rigour in qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal* 5, no. 1: 27–40.
- Hall, M. 2006. *Employment Equity Report to Council*. Senate minutes, University of Cape Town.
- Hall, M. 2007. The case for equity. *Monday Paper*. April 23–May 6, 3. University of Cape Town.
- Higgins, J. 2007. Managing meaning: The constitutive contradictions of institutional culture. *Social Dynamics* 33, no. 1: 107–29.
- Ismail, S. 2000. Investigation of staff perceptions of institutional culture at UCT. <http://www.uct.ac.za/ched/transformation>.
- Ismail, S. 2002. Everyday experiences of black, disabled and women staff in the Health Science Faculty at UCT. <http://www.health.uct.ac.za/transformation/pdfs/ch6/pdf>.
- Ismail, S. 2007. 'Did I say that?' A follow up study of the shifts in black and women staff experiences of institutional culture in the Health Science Faculty of the University of Cape Town. *Social Dynamics* 33, no. 1: 78–106.
- Ismail, S. 2008. Researching transformation – The politics of representation. Paper presented at the Higher Education Close Up Conference, June 26–28, in Cape Town. <http://www.closeup4.uct.ac.za>.
- Jansen, J. 2005. Black dean: Race, reconciliation and the emotions of deanship. *Harvard Educational Review* 75, no. 3: 306–26.
- Kezar, A., and P.D. Eckel. 2002. The effect of institutional culture on change strategies in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education* 73, no. 40: 435–60.
- Laclau, E., and C. Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. New York: Verso.
- Lapping, C. 2008. The ethics of interpretation: The signifying chain from fieldwork to analysis. *Discourse* 29, no. 1: 69–83.
- McKeever, M. 2000. Snakes and ladders: Ethical issues in conducting research in a postcolonial context. In *Situated ethics in educational research*, ed. H. Simons and R. Usher, 101–15. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Merrill, B., and L. West. 2009. *Using biographical methods in social research*. London: Sage.
- Mngxitama, A. 2008. Apartheid state remains. *Mail and Guardian*, May 23–29, 34.
- Morley, L., and V. Walsh, eds. 1996. *Breaking boundaries: Women in higher education*. New York: Mellon Foundation.

- Parkes, J. 2007. The power of talk: Transformative possibilities in researching violence with children in South Africa. *International Journal of Research Methodology* 10: 1–14.
- Patai, D. 1991. U.S. academics and third world women: Is ethical research possible? In *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history*, ed. S. Berger Gluck and D. Patai, 137–53. New York: Routledge.
- Pendelbury, S., and P. Enslin. 2001. Representation, identification and trust: Towards an ethics of educational research. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 3: 361–70.
- Ramphele, M. 2008. Xenophobia crisis should jolt us from apathy. *Cape Times*, May 23, 9.
- Shackleton, L. 2007. Lost in liberalism: A case study of the disappearance of the gender agenda at a South African university. *Feminist Africa* 9: 23–41.
- Simons, H. 2000. Damned if you do, damned if you don't – Ethical and political dilemmas in evaluation. In *Situated ethics in educational research*, ed. H. Simons and R. Usher, 39–55. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Simons, H., and R. Usher, eds. 2000. *Situated ethics in educational research*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Spivak, G.C. 1994. Can the subaltern speak? In *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader*, ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman, 66–111. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Vice-Chancellor's Strategic Concept Papers. 2009. Senate Minutes, University of Cape Town.
- Visser, G. n.d. Researcher positionality and political–temporal contingency in a postapartheid research environment. *Research Papers in Environmental and Spatial Analysis*. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/geographyAndEnvironment/research/Researchpapers/rp59.pdf>.