

# **Unearthing white academics' experience of teaching in higher education in South Africa**

Jeff Jawitz

Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

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## **Abstract**

The real and imagined racial differences and similarities between groups of students and staff have consequences in everyday experiences in South Africa. One aspect of engaging with the challenges facing higher education transformation post-Apartheid is through understanding how the racialised context interacts with the experience of teaching. This paper reports on what the narratives of four white academics reveal about their experience of teaching at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It analyses indicators of their identity as white academics and how they are both positioned and actively position themselves in relation to students and other academics at UCT. Their narratives reveal how academics simultaneously grapple with the privileges and limitations that accompany identifying as white. These tensions are explored through issues of black student development amid an alienating institutional culture and opposition to the behaviour of their white colleagues.

**Keywords:** higher education; race; teaching; transformation; whiteness

## **Introduction**

Despite the gains made towards the formal de-racialisation of South Africa since 1994, the country 'remains an intensely racialized society, in which issues of race remain at the forefront of social, political and economic attention' (Posel 2015, 2170). The country is 'still a visibly divided and suspicious land' (Vice 2010, 323) in which 'race is the unacknowledged elephant in the room that affects pretty much everything in and

Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701, Cape Town South Africa, Email: [jeff.jawitz@uct.ac.za](mailto:jeff.jawitz@uct.ac.za)

outside academia' (2010, 324).

Our social identity is constructed by 'who we are seen to be', in part, through attention to differences and similarities (Jenkins 2008, 3). During South Africa's apartheid past each person's racial classification was legally prescribed based on who they were recognized to be (Posel 2001). The majority of South Africans continue to identify themselves using apartheid-era racial classifications (Seekings 2008, 6). This tendency is reinforced by national policy and legislation seeking to correct historical inequalities in enrolment and employment practices. Students and staff continue to be required to classify themselves using racial categories, White, Coloured, Indian or African (DoL 1998).

In trying to shake off this past, individuals and communities respond in different ways 'both within themselves and in relation to other communities with which they share physical and discursive spaces' (Distiller and Steyn 2004, 1). This research focuses on the way in which academic identities and practices interact within South African higher education, through the narratives of four white academics. It forms part of a body of research that recognises the ongoing 'performance of "race" in the everyday culture of post-apartheid South Africa' (Distiller and Steyn 2004, 2). Its' aim is to contribute to a conversation that explores ways in which ' "race" informs and animates different South African experiences of self and of the world' (Distiller and Steyn 2004, 3).

### **South African higher education as a racialised space**

South African higher education is struggling to shake off the legacy of 'the racist, patriarchal and authoritarian apartheid social order' (Badat 2009, 457). It remains a space 'of intense sociological complexity' in which there is much that resembles the 'everyday experience of race ... as teaching and learning takes place' (Soudien 2008, 674).

Classrooms continue to be ‘deeply divided places where contending histories and rival lived experiences come ... into the same pedagogical space’ (Jansen 2009, 208).

While black student enrolments have increased dramatically, white academic staff continue to dominate academic positions across the system (Council on Higher Education 2015). Thaver argues that this dominance ‘means that the experiences and knowledge of one racial group are anchoring the sector as a whole’ (2003, 144). Others agree that this situation impacts on institutional culture which is ‘based on the privilege of Whites at the expense of Blacks’ (Portnoi 2009, 382). It also affects the experience of black undergraduate students (Soudien 2008) and the way that discussions of race, social justice and reconciliation are confined to institutional and public domains (Nel 2012).

Reports of racist behaviour at higher education institutions erupt into the public domain at regular intervals (Capazorio and Davids 2014; Joseph 2015; The Guardian 2015). After a particularly ugly instance of abuse by white male students on black female workers at an institution, the government appointed a commission (DoE 2008) to investigate continuing discrimination at South African universities. The commission’s report cited many examples of discrimination involving language use in academic practice, assessment practices, and ‘uncompromising institutional cultures which favour white experiences and marginalise black ones’ (DoE 2008, 117).

The differences arising out of the ‘rival lived experiences’ (Jansen 2009) of students and staff, give rise to recurring debates around the slow progress of transformation across the higher education sector. In 2015 at the time of writing this paper, widespread protests demanding an accelerated transformation of South African universities were being led by black students and staff. The main demand was for historically white institutions to ‘decolonize’ their curricula and dismantle institutional

cultures associated with the maintenance of white privilege (Kamanzi 2015). These demands echo calls from elsewhere in Africa for ‘an end to the hegemony of Western thought and culture’ and the development of higher education curricula that are more responsive and relevant to ‘African identity, culture and issues’ (Lockett 2010, 7).

### **Researching race**

Given this context, this article reports on research into how racial identities interact with the experience of teaching at a South African university. Looking for race is a complex process. The experience of race at post-apartheid South African universities has taken on a ‘sublimated form’ working in conjunction with other social factors, and as such it is ‘hard to recognize and name’ (Soudien 2008, 664). Critical race theory (CRT) provides a framework and a set of guidelines for applying the concept of race in research (Ritzer 2008). Despite emphasising the centrality of black experience within any context, CRT recognizes the intersectionality with aspects such as gender, class and sexuality. It argues that black people cannot be stereotyped and exist with ‘conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties and allegiances’ (Delgado and Stefancic 2009).

Aligned with CRT has been a series of studies that use the concept of ‘whiteness’ to critique the way that ‘white experience’ dominates discourse and identity positions (Distiller and Steyn 2004). Whiteness refers to the norming of white values and behaviours and the lack of awareness amongst those who identify as white of ongoing white privilege (Steyn 2001). The ‘colourblindness’ posited in most education and related studies, according to these critical whiteness theorists, is evidence of a dominant liberal discourse that accepts the notion of whiteness as normal (Dixson and Rousseau 2005, 16). Maart (2014, 74) highlights the complicity of her white academic colleagues

in undermining efforts to transform higher education by their ‘resistance’ to ‘naming their White identities and recognizing that their silence keeps their benefactor status intact’.

Vice argues that ‘feeling uncomfortable is an ineradicable part of white life’ in South Africa, a consequence of ‘habitual white privilege and moral damage’ (2010, 326) and for whites who are aware of the ways in which they benefitted, and continue to benefit from white privilege, feelings of guilt, shame and regret are appropriate. Vice suggests that by adopting a stance of humility and silence in public interaction, white South Africans would signal a ‘recognition of one’s morally troubling situation and a determination to prevent it from causing further harm’ (Vice 2010, 335). However, keeping quiet in interactions can also be seen as a stigma management strategy (Goffman 1963) to minimize the stigma of racism associated with the white South African stereotype.

A challenge in researching race, is to avoid reinforcing or reifying racial categories inherited as part of South Africa’s apartheid lexicon. However, ‘to insist on the constructed nature of “race” is not to make it impossible to talk about the material reality generated by the concept’ (Distiller and Steyn 2004, 7). As a white male academic I experience some of the same dilemmas as other white male academics, and this research is an examination of the social spaces that are ‘opened up and closed down by racial thinking and organisation’ (Distiller and Steyn 2004, 8).

I have chosen to use the descriptor ‘black’, as defined by the Employment Equity Act (DoL 1998), to refer to persons previously classified Coloured, Indian or African. The use of ‘black’ inclusively in this way is not meant to ignore difference, but rather to emphasize the shared experience of disenfranchisement. On a few occasions my

interviewees used the term ‘black’ differently, to refer only to African students. I use the term ‘white’ to refer to those persons who would previously have been classified as such.

### **Research method**

This study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemological approach that generates meaning from research participants, as ‘agents with valued local knowledge’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). This research orientation does not seek to generalize but rather uses explanatory description to explore participants’ use of language.

My identity as a middle-aged, white, male academic means I occupy a position, at a historically white university in South Africa that is associated with past and present privilege. The ‘members’ resources’ I draw on ‘in the production and interpretation of meaning’ (Fairclough 1992, 80) include my experience of teaching in student academic development programmes and my work in academic staff development programmes, in particular those supporting new academics in their transition into UCT.

I had previously explored the narratives of two black academics at a historically white university in South Africa (Jawitz 2012). Their stories reflected a positioning of their teaching practice in relation to that of their fellow white academics. The one told of how his white colleagues assessed their black students more strictly than their white students, while the other observed his white colleagues being more ‘gentle’ when grading black students. Despite these different experiences, both viewed the assessment practices of their white colleagues as detrimental to the success of black students.

This paper is based on a follow up study to explore the narratives of academic staff that identify as white within the racialised context of South African higher education. Research participants were selected from amongst colleagues who had attended a postgraduate course on teaching in higher education that I taught at the University of Cape

Town (UCT). Using this pool of academics was deliberate to enable me to draw on the expertise they had developed to reflect critically on their experience of teaching. Secondly, working with white academics with strong educator identities, helped to preface voices that were not embedded in the dominant research perspective of UCT (Jawitz and Williams 2015). The aim of the research was to explore the interaction between academics' racial identities and their experience of teaching. The interviews began with a request for a description of their most significant experiences involving teaching at UCT. For the remainder of the interviews the narratives unfolded at length with little need for prompting. In the interest of anonymity I have changed their names and make no reference to their discipline or department.

Drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992) I noted interviewees use, or avoidance, of racial descriptors and mentions, or omissions, of their own racial identity. It is possible that as white males there was an unspoken assumption that we shared elements of a common identity which contributed to what was said and not said during the interviews (Song and Parker 1995; Ramji 2008). Although I had anticipated that issues raised in the interviews would traverse the intersections of race, gender and class, racial issues dominated the narratives and hence form the focus of analysis in this paper.

## **Findings**

The findings are divided into two parts. Part one introduces each respondent and compares their use of racial descriptors. Part two compares significant experiences with regards to identifying as white, being interpreted as white, or identifying others as white. The overarching theme is how these experiences expose the paradox between the privilege and limitations of being white.

## *Use of racial descriptors*

### *Interviewee 1: Rob: 'I'm the whitey'*

Rob<sup>1</sup> was a relative newcomer to UCT and arrived with previous experience of teaching at high school and neighbouring universities. In his role as a lecturer in his department, he was engaged in educational development work which included providing support for black students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. After finishing my course, Rob went on to complete a PhD in Higher Education.

The use of racial descriptors evoked discomfort in Rob. While he often separated out black students for mention in the interview, he acknowledged feeling conflicted about doing so. He expressed the view that issues of class and the presence of 'international black students' made it difficult to generalize about race. Furthermore he felt that his hesitancy to 'distinguish the black kids' from the rest of the class might possibly be an obstacle to addressing some of the underlying problems at UCT.

I haven't really ... got to grips with being able to teach at UCT. And I wonder if ... part of it is also the sense that we don't want to distinguish the black kids from the other kids. We ... don't want them to feel, like, stigmatized. And in a way I feel that ... that maybe prevents us from really getting to grips with the kind of systemic problems that these students are inheriting. (Rob)

In contrast to the view that white South Africans in general fail to acknowledge their privilege (Steyn 2001), Rob's narrative was framed by an acute awareness of his white identity.

I feel uncomfortable ... that the black kids will think that ... I'm part of the UCT system that's sort of trying to put them down and in their place. That's kind of how I feel uncomfortable about it. I'm the whitey, you know. (Rob)

For Rob, being white is a source of discomfort that reveals the limitations of white privilege in the context of teaching. It is others' interpretation of him rather than his own conception of what it means to be white that gives rise to this sense of discomfort. His concerns stem from what 'black kids will think' as opposed to students from other racial groups. His white academic identity positions him as 'part of the UCT system'. This gives rise to the danger that black students will automatically connect him with stereotypes of UCT as institutionally racist. This potential stigma was reflected in his use of the colloquial term 'whitey' to refer to himself and his repeated worries about how his black students might view him in relation to his other white colleagues.

His feeling 'uncomfortable' communicated a level of shame, which Vice (2010) argues is appropriate for white South Africans. Counter to Vice advocating 'silence and humility', later in the interview Rob articulated a need to distance himself from the 'conservatism' of his colleagues and the 'racist' university system as a whole. His awareness of his whiteness is reflected in his desire to help his black students understand that 'whiteys aren't all like that'. In this way he attempted to set himself apart from other white academics that are oblivious of their privilege. Implicit in Rob's discomfort is an assumption that black students generalize about white academics, as much as 'whiteys' generalize about black students. Remaining silent runs the risk of black students failing to differentiate between Rob and other white academics at UCT.

*Interviewee 2: Melvin: 'I did not know how to approach them'*

Like Rob, Melvin was also relatively new to UCT, had significant high school teaching experience, and was engaged in academic development work at departmental level, supporting black students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. Melvin made no reference to himself as white but frequently used the descriptor 'black' with regard to his

students. An awareness of his white identity emerged in his description of the challenge he faced when arriving at UCT after having taught at an ‘all white school’.

For the first time I was teaching black students ... initially I did not know how to approach them. I was very self-conscious. (Melvin)

While Melvin was new to UCT and the higher education space, the aspect of inexperience that he chooses to highlight is the absence of any previous interaction with black students in his role as a teacher. Implicit in his construction of race is an assumption that he cannot replicate his previous approach, with his white school students, in his engagement with black students at UCT. This knowledge gap gave rise to feelings of insecurity that Melvin articulates as being ‘very self-conscious’. Unlike Rob’s worry about being perceived as a stereotypical ‘whitey’, Melvin’s concern was about being perceived as devoid of the skills required to ‘approach’ black students. The overlap in their accounts is their shared concern with treating black students as a homogenous group and racism.

Like Rob, Melvin expressed concern about the tendency for his colleagues to make generalisations about black students. He described black students in his classes as ‘incredibly diverse’ in terms of ‘languages’ and ‘cultures’ and felt that ‘to lump them all into one group’ belonged to the ‘apartheid era’. They both imply that on these grounds they feel the need to differentiate themselves from colleagues in order to quell their anxieties about being seen as ‘colourblind’ (Dixson and Rousseau 2005).

*Interviewee 3: Ian: ‘I had a different sense of humour’*

Ian was appointed at UCT after completing his professional qualifications with no previous teaching experience and had spent over 20 years teaching his discipline. After finishing my course Ian went on to complete a Master’s Degree in higher education.

Ian was comfortable using descriptors ‘white’ and ‘black’ when describing himself, his colleagues and his students. He also voiced concern at the ‘generalizations being made about black students’ particularly in relation to them being ‘academically disadvantaged’. He described the increasing numbers of ‘talented black students coming into the [Faculty]’ and he wondered how they felt when they heard these generalisations being made about them. Similar to Rob, he tries to put himself in the position of black students and his concern is how black students might feel about the judgments made about them.

The connection between Melvin and Ian is their shared concern about how to approach black students in their role as teachers. In one of the few references to the intersectionality between age, race and gender, Ian drew a direct link between his identity as an aging, white, male and his teaching practice:

[Humour] used to be ... one of my tools.... Then I realized that...the things that I thought were funny, weren't funny for this growing group of black students. ... I couldn't identify with the...cultures...from where those students were coming. I had a different sense of humour. I had a different way of doing things...of thinking about things... it was an ageing thing and it was [about] being a white male. (Ian)

Although Ian indicates that he normally uses a range of pedagogical ‘tools’, he singles out humour as a way to identify with students. It provides a shared point of reference around which teacher and students can unite, evidenced from both parties finding something funny. However the increasing numbers of black students made him question the extent to which his humour remained universally amusing, concluding that what makes him laugh was not comical for black students. Ian extrapolates from this a student-teacher divide in terms of doing and thinking about things that can be traced according to age, race and gender.

Ian's sense of humour is not symptomatic of conformity to a 'whitey' stereotype (Rob), a lack of experience with teaching black students (Melvin) or a source of anxiety (Rob and Melvin). Humour was a tool that no longer served its original purpose and therefore, in order to navigate this racialised space, he chooses to curtail the use of humour in his teaching repertoire. His assumption is his use of humour will alienate black students. Rather than learn what makes black students laugh, he suppresses his urge to use humour as a teaching tool. In this way he could be seen to be adopting a stance of 'silence and humility' (Vice 2010) in his interaction with his students in the classroom.

*Interviewee 4: Carl: 'I don't want to be labelled'*

Carl, like Ian, was appointed at UCT after completing his professional qualifications with no previous teaching experience and had spent over 20 years teaching in his discipline. Like Rob, he went on to complete his PhD in higher education after finishing my course.

Carl was the only interviewee that avoided using racial descriptors altogether. Instead he talked about 'students with different backgrounds' and his own 'privileged background' which highlighted his sensitivity to the intersectionality between class and race. His first use of a racial descriptor in his interview was while reflecting on his experience of doing my course on teaching in higher education. It was during this time that he had begun to recognize the 'limitations' of 'being a white male' and the implications of having grown up in a 'privileged community'. His experience of my course had assisted him in coming to understand the significance of unspoken racial, gender and class privileges and he had realized that he had 'no idea' what black students might be experiencing within the institution. This was not so much a denial of the privileges of being white (Steyn 2001) but rather an awareness of his limited capacity to empathise with black experience as a result of being privileged.

He described an experience of teaching that had been a ‘big wake up moment’ for him in underlining how little he understood about black student’s lives. He had required students to develop a computer simulation of what he regarded as an everyday mechanism, on the assumption that everyone in the class would be familiar with operating this mechanism. He discovered that many of his black students had had no such experience. This made him realize that there were ‘students in the class with different backgrounds [and] different access to resources’ and that this impacted on ‘their ability to be successful’. He argued that his lack of understanding of black students’ previous and present circumstances was a serious limitation on his ability to design appropriate teaching activities.

It’s more than just educational background.... Prior access to resources seems to allow a ... particular world view.... It comes down to particular discourses the students come into university with. (Carl)

A key element of his narrative involved a display of anxiety around how to talk about race and use racial descriptors without running the risk of being labelled as ‘racist’. He felt that talking about race involved ‘showing something about who you are’ and he did not want to be viewed as someone who was ‘prejudicial’. This behaviour might also be understood as the adoption of a strategy of silence (Vice 2010) as evident in his confession that even in the very ‘safe supportive environment’ of my Masters course, it had been ‘very difficult to talk honestly about these issues’. Carl’s experience supports the views of Distiller and Steyn who argue that ‘we simply don’t know how to talk to each other about “race” ’ (2004, 3).

[I am] uncomfortable about ... putting myself out there to be labelled.... I see them as legitimate struggles within myself which I’m working with and grappling with

and trying to understand ... I don't want to be labelled by putting myself out there and talking about it. (Carl)

While all four narratives provide evidence of the significance of being white as an academic in South Africa, Carl and Rob, and to a lesser extent Ian, reveal their experience of the limitations of their white identity in the context of teaching at UCT. Despite variance in their use of racial categories, it was clear that the interviewees grouped participants in their work environment into racialised clusters, namely black students, white students and [white] colleagues. In the next section I explore what their narratives reveal as to how they position themselves in relation to these players.

### *Stigma management*

Thus far the use of racial descriptors reveals an awareness of privilege, and the limitations that accompany white identity. Melvin and Ian identify as white and this limits the confidence that they have in making pedagogical choices. Rob and Carl's experiences of the limitation of being white stems from how they feel their whiteness is perceived by others, in particular black students. In all these cases there is an expression of discomfort with the label 'white' that can be interpreted as stigma (Goffman 1963). This section expands on these academics' interpretations of identifying as white and of being seen as white, with regards to how they manage the discrediting attributes associated with their white identity. The discussion here shifts the focus to how language is used to position individuals in order to manage the stigma of being white.

#### *Interviewee 1: Rob: 'It's so difficult to challenge'*

While no explicit reference was made to white academics in all four interviews, Melvin and Rob positioned themselves in opposition to colleagues in their departments and,

despite the absence of racial descriptors, the context suggests that they were referring to their white colleagues. Rob described his experience of distance from some of his colleagues in graphic terms.

I think [black students] feel intimidated by this whole kind of environment ... because of some of the encounters they may have had with white staff. I've been there when white staff have been very... denigrating ... Like ... "I told you not to fill in the form that way! Go away and do it again!" And I've said to them, "Do you realize you're alienating students by doing that?"... It seems that black students tend to bear the brunt of that sort of criticism. Maybe if it was a white student they would do the same ... but I notice the effect it has on those [black] students and I'm concerned that it's going to alienate those students that already feel alienated, whereas we're supposed to be transforming. (Rob)

Rob made the point that by just 'walking down the corridor' one could 'understand completely how black kids can ... feel intimidated'. Given Rob's concern about the 'intimidating environment' for black students, he focusses on the way white staff speak to students, in particular their lack of patience and aggressive tone. He cites overhearing colleagues talk to students as an illustration of how alienation is achieved and speculates that denigrating comments are more likely to be made to black students. If viewed through CRT then the generalizations that Rob makes about white staff and their inability to recognize how they alienate black students is evidence of their whiteness (Distiller and Steyn 2004). In his re-enactment he disrupts the interaction by speaking out so as to emphasise the negative impact his white colleagues have on students.

However, in staff only spaces he chooses not to voice his dissent. These spaces seem to pose more of a challenge. Rob's most distressing experiences had been in relation to his fear of the 'conservative system' in his department and his sense of powerlessness in the face of the actions of his colleagues.

I come face-to-face with it in my department.... When staff members make ... very conservative kind of comments ... I'm afraid ... because it's so difficult to challenge. ... If I challenge it you would ... alienate yourself from the whole system that you are trying to help. So you become part of it. ... You kind of get sucked into it. (Rob)

Something about the departmental staff only space makes it difficult to interject as he did in the staff-student interaction. In this space it is he who feels at risk of being alienated. His silence is prefaced on the assumption that speaking out against his colleagues and the 'whole system' inhibits his ability to bring about change. He felt that confrontation simply 'polarized' the department. His inability to confront the system left him feeling complicit, disempowered and unable to support those colleagues who attempted to challenge the 'conservative' comments. He chose rather to 'retreat' or 'just leave it' and 'sit it out and wait' until the older 'conservative' colleagues retire from UCT.

It doesn't help those people ... They can't see what they're doing. ... It's just a kind of entrenched system they've come to grow up in ... When they leave, I think things will change. (Rob)

Using metaphors of warfare Rob positioned himself as an education activist whose 'battle' was 'fighting what apartheid education entrenched'. He argued that UCT had 'inherited ... a racist social structure... which you become part of involuntarily, [even if] you don't want to be part of it'. He referred repeatedly to his fear that black students might see him as being part of the racial hierarchy at UCT. Thus Rob fears being a victim of stigma by association, which he chooses to manage through voicing objections in some spaces, while remaining silent in others.

The tension between voice and silence can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand Rob's selective silence, when he witnesses white colleagues making 'conservative comments', unintentionally contributes to the discourse of whiteness as

normal. However, his silence could also be viewed as an active strategy (Vice 2010). The utility of silence in staff only spaces is to avoid alienating himself from white academics, so that when he does voice objections he is more likely to be taken seriously. However his primary concern is to manage the stigma of being white in interactions with black students, not with white staff who are oblivious to the impression that their attitude gives to black students.

Rob described how ‘a lot of stuff comes out’ during classroom discussions that reveals that ‘white kids’ are unaware of ‘the kind of hardships that black people face in our country’. In his experience white students often made generalizations about black people such as ‘the people in the township are uneducated [and] don’t know how to use appliances’. During a class discussion on the problem of fires in informal settlements, a white student had remarked that they should just ‘let the fires continue and burn the townships down’. When such statements were made he sensed ‘black students receding ... not willing to talk’.

Rob felt that raising issues of race formally in class tended to ‘polarize’ students and he preferred to work at the individual level to change what he regarded as the negative perceptions black students have of white people.

A kind word to one student will actually do a whole lot. It will really change their like “Wow! They’re not all alike. All these whiteys aren’t all like that!” ... I try to engage with the students as much as I can in that kind of way. (Rob)

Rob’s concern is for how he is perceived by students. Rather than being part of a movement that challenges racism, he instead takes an incremental approach to change beginning by setting himself apart from other ‘whiteys’.

He interprets the utility of his silence in group interactions, with white colleagues or with a diverse range of students in the classroom, as an attempt to avoid alienating himself or ‘polarizing’ the different racial groupings. However, his silence does not necessarily communicate humility (Vice 2010) but implicitly defends white privilege. His choice to only challenge stereotypes in individual interactions with colleagues or students, for him is a form of activism. However, the emphasis he places on black students’ perceptions of him, somewhat reduces this activism to a stigma management strategy.

*Interviewee 2: Melvin: ‘They don’t feel as comfortable’*

Like Rob, Melvin revealed a sense of distance from his white colleagues and the university environment as a whole, aggravated by his choosing not to embrace research as part of his academic identity. He commented that he felt ‘very much alone and isolated in this job... [as] very few’ of his colleagues felt the same way as he did about teaching.

Melvin and Rob explicitly positioned themselves as support agents in relation to black students and made repeated reference to UCT as an ‘intimidating and alienating’ environment for black students. Their narratives reveal an awareness of the dominance of white privilege in relation to power.

As convenor of a course for black students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds Melvin expressed a commitment to helping them succeed. He argued that ‘race is important’ and that ‘black and coloured students are not given enough support in their learning’.

Black<sup>2</sup> students and coloured students do not have the same sense of legitimacy... They don’t feel as comfortable here as white students do. I think white students still come in feeling very comfortable because they come into an institution

which is basically white. Nearly all the lecturers here are white and they come from a background ... making them feel confident at university. (Melvin)

Melvin positioned himself in an oppositional relationship to white students. He compared the 'warmth' he experienced with his class of black students with his experience of teaching a class that was '90% white'. He described those students as 'demanding', 'impatient', 'obnoxious', and said they had displayed a 'sense of entitlement'.

*Interviewee 3: Ian: 'I don't address their racial group'*

Ian's narrative provided further evidence of a racialised interaction between academics and their students. He explained that the new affirmative action admissions policy allowed only a few of the very best white male applicants into his programme. He confessed that he had become 'less tolerant of bad behaviour and poor academic performance by... [these] privileged white [male] students' and would call them into his office.

I'm far more confrontational when it comes to that [white] group than I used to be ... and they respond. ... Like a parent talking to a naughty child ... it works. ... I do it because I feel safe doing it. I could probably not do it with another racial group. ... I would be scared that they would say "You've crossed a boundary now". I'm gentler with [black students]. ... I don't address their racial group. With the white students I address the fact that they're white, because I'm white and I think it's safe. (Ian)

The presence of black students in the classroom means that Ian has modified his attitude to both white and black students with regard to behaviour management strategies. Although he finds that talking to a student like a naughty child is an effective strategy, he chooses not to apply it to black students. Like Rob, the way he differentiates how he speaks to students is founded on a concern of what black students will think. Interactions

with white students are 'safe' because he does not worry about how his parental way of talking to them will be perceived. Conversely, the same paternal interaction is likely to be objected to by black students as crossing a line.

He acknowledged drawing on an assumed common white experience in his interaction with his white students in which the stigma of being white was not present. He felt that white students would accept his talking to them 'like a parent' who has their interests at heart. This reflection provides a glimpse of a deep sense of what it means to be white and how this enables certain types of interactions between this white academic and his white students, but prevents the same kind of interaction with his black students. His admission that as a white academic he treated his black students 'gentler' is in line with the behaviour of white academics reported by Zaid, one of the black academics in my previous study (Jawitz 2012).

Were Rob to address black students in the same way as he does his white students it might surface the discrediting aspects of being white, connected to stereotypes of a historical paternalism between white and black racial groups. The assumption is that a shared racial identity entitles an academic to use racial categories, whereas racial difference requires a silencing with respect to race. This silence could be interpreted as exhibiting humility (Vice 2010) but it might also be understood as a way to deal with his behaviour management strategies that might be a source of stigma, given the discrediting history of white paternalism.

*Interviewee 4: Carl: 'I was trying to be completely honest and open'*

Both Carl and Rob felt that their actions contributed towards shifting the perceptions of their black students and colleagues by helping them understand how some white academics were attempting to engage with race. In this way they believed that they were

helping to erode what they regarded as a negative stereotype held, by their black students and colleagues, of white people in general and white academics in particular.

Carl described how his personal journey had taken a substantial turn when, after almost ten years of teaching at UCT, he had initiated his first conversation with a black person about how to engage with the issue of race. The opportunity arose when his colleagues had given him a ‘friendly heckle’ about his use of the words ‘black’ and ‘white’ during a presentation. He had approached one of the hecklers, a black South African colleague and admitted opening himself up in a way that he had never done before.

What I did was to say, this is who I am. ... It’s raw emotional stuff hey. This is my belief system, this is where I am in my journey at the moment, and now that it’s out there, without judging, let’s talk. ... I hadn’t openly been able to talk with somebody who was black around this issue before. .... I hadn’t meant to ... be stereotypical in any way. But in discussion, clearly I was. ... It was an honest discussion about a very vexed issue. ... It was emotionally very ... hard and challenging. (Carl)

He described his colleague’s response as ‘very open and honest’. The engagement had been ‘far more enriching and more useful’ than any workshop he had ever attended. It had been a ‘real discussion about real things between two real people’. In the process he felt it had also helped his black colleague develop a better understanding of the difficulties experienced by white academics in engaging with race.

Recognizing...that it’s difficult for ... people like me... a white male from ... a privileged background. We also really want to engage with these issues... Not all of us are completely oblivious to the issues.... I would suspect that they don’t see us ... engaging with the issues honestly. (Carl)

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the experience of four white academics at UCT, has thrown light on the interaction between racial identity and academic teaching practice within the racialized context of higher education in South Africa. The narratives of four white academics reveal a conscious attempt to imagine students' experience of education at the University of Cape Town, and interrogate what part academics' interactions with staff and students play in these experiences. Each interviewee displayed a consciousness of their white identity that challenges stereotypical images of white academics as oblivious to the racial dynamics in their interactions.

In the case of these individuals, I was also confronted with evidence that challenged the idea of 'the white academic' as standing in opposition to transformation in higher education. In contrast all four narratives referred to black students as the most significant and vulnerable group at UCT and positioned themselves as being support agents for them. They also highlighted ways in which some of their white colleagues' behaviours reinforced an institutional culture at UCT that alienates black students. Their narratives serve to challenge the notion of a homogeneous white academic community by positioning themselves in an oppositional relationship to what they described as 'conservative' academics and a 'racist' discourse at UCT.

While each interviewee expressed concern for the potential of racial descriptors to reinforce stereotypes, they were unable to avoid using these descriptors in describing their experience of teaching at UCT. This came through both in the way they talked about their colleague's behaviours and the experience of white and black students. Interviewee's narratives point to a paradox between an awareness of both the privileges associated with being white, for both students and academic staff, and the simultaneous

‘limitations of being white’ in the context of white academics teaching in higher education in South Africa.

Foremost amongst these limitations was the distance from black experience, the dangers of association with the ‘racist social structure’ and the recognition that being white enabled certain interactions with students, and prevented others. In explaining how they tried to effect change, their narratives revealed a tendency to manage the stigma of being white by differentiating themselves from the ‘whitey’ stereotype. However, the selective use of silence may unintentionally contribute to dominant discourses that position white as normal. A challenge for future research and academic development is to seek to address the inference from this study that the way in which many white academics at UCT interact with the highly racialized space, continues to reinforce an institutional environment that is hostile to black students.

## **Notes**

- 1 Pseudonyms have been used at the request of the individuals involved in this study.
- 2 Melvin’s uses the term “black” differs from my inclusive use and refers only to students categorised as African in the Employment Equity Act.

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