RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constitution and negotiation of rural students' identities at an urban South African university

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ABSTRACT

Utilising a social constructivist lens, this study explores how students from rural areas constitute and negotiate their identities in the context of an urban South African university. Much of the research on rurality in South Africa has focused on rural areas as places, and not on the people occupying them. This qualitative study employed a narrative inquiry, using the life course theory of development as its theoretical framework. Data collection comprised a mix of semi-structured questionnaires and focus group interviews. Data were analysed by means of content analysis. The findings were threefold: first, in constituting their identities, rural students remained grounded in their rural identities. Contrary to the literature, which found rural students trying to fit into the dominant hegemonic culture of an urban university. Second, in negotiating their identities, rural students assumed hyphenated identities – the rural-urban binary – to blend into the urban environment, assuming a 'chameleon' identity, but did not abandon their socio-cultural upbringing, philosophy, values, and attributes when they joined an urban institution. They aligned with philosophies and values that resonated with their upbringing rather than seeking to be assimilated. Third, when they joined an urban university, they began to perceive their role as having shifted from being recipients of their background to becoming contributors to its development.

KEYWORDS

Rural students, constitution of identity, negotiation of identity, urban university, rural areas

Introduction and background

To fully understand the context of South African higher education, it is important to note that the twenty-six public universities in South Africa are differentiated according to the spatial and historical legacies of apartheid (Govinder et al., 2013). Some universities are semi-urban or rural, but most are located in metropolitan areas across the country, in the centres of economic activity. The study that was undertaken was of students in South Africa's university system who came from rural environments (Wongo, 2016).

In rural high schools in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, students' backgrounds are community-focused (Zhang et al., 2017). Socio-cultural issues that the students are born into are homogenous cultures, races and languages. The contrast between rural and urban environments in South Africa is particularly evident in South Africa's secondary schooling system. Secondary schools are stratified along economic

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lines, and this leads to huge disparities between rural and urban students (Van Breda, 2001; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018). For example, geographical stratification ensures that high schools are differentiated by access to transport, and information and communication technology. Funding for high schools is officially divided in terms of the national criteria for schools: they are classified as quintiles 1-5, with quintile 1 schools being the poorest of the schools in South Africa. The majority of rural schools are classified as quintile 1 (Department of Basic Education, 2004).

This economic stratification in South Africa's secondary schooling system inevitably spills over into universities (Govinder et al., 2013). When students join a university in South Africa, the disparities on the basis of affluence of background and geographical location are evident. Students who are plagued by these disparities have to battle with identification at the new institution at different levels: personally, institutionally and academically (Ramrathan & Pillay, 2015; Spaull, 2013).

The constitution of personal identity

There are multiple interpretations of how identity is constituted, therefore there are various descriptions of it. Some regard it as a set of traits learned at different intervals in a person's life which manifest in the ways they perceive themselves and others (Vandeyar et al., 2014). Identity is sometimes viewed as something people do, embedded in their social activities, or as part of their orientation towards their local and regional cultures. The main consensus, however, is that it is an individual's sense of belonging (Syed et al., 2011; Vandeyar et al., 2014).

For this study, the definition by Auerbach et al. (1999) (quoted in Parameswaran, 1999, p. 52), appropriately points out that "[i]dentity relates to desire – the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety". This definition was preferred by the researchers because of its relevance to this particular study, in which a student's constitution of identity is viewed as an evolving process of representations of attitudes, expectations, social actions and behaviour, influenced by the student's socialisation process (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Chee et al., 2019).

The negotiation of identity

The literature reveals an interplay of layers in how students negotiate their identities. The discussion has been foregrounded under three important aspects: dislocation and integration, situational identity, and the role of identity brokers. These concepts are borrowed from various studies addressing the development of students' identities at universities. Vincent and Hlatshwayo (2018, p. 122) state, "Students in our study cited that unfamiliarity with the institutional culture and demands of the university makes integration into and acceptance of the university far more challenging. When it comes to integration and belonging "students often discuss rather similar struggles of not fitting in" Lehman (2000, p. 99).

Situational factors such as experiences of contact or distance learning, race, language, socio-cultural factors and gender often require that students shift their identity representation based on the environment (Harry et al., 2008). They are viewed

as key in the cyclical process of students' identity negotiation. Some aspects are more dominant than others, depending on the individual and the environment in which they are situated (Chetty & Vigar-Ellis, 2017). Thus, it is evident that identities are negotiated through habitus, or situations.

Identities are also negotiated by employing supportive agents or brokers of identity development (Modipane, 2011). In an academic institution, this can range from institutions offering bursaries and sponsorships, to the influence of lecturers, mentors and peers. For example, some institutions insist on language standardisation as a qualifier or for gaining university entry and for being considered for a scholarship. In such cases, organizations advocate for identity linked to a particular language (Diab et al., 2015; Chee et al., 2019). The literature, therefore, identifies that rural students negotiate identity through:

Socio-economic barriers to learning

When rural students reach an urban university, their situation changes as they are disconnected from their former way of learning, because, how learning is conducted at university differs vastly from the rural experience (Harrison, 2006). Students experience an inclination to dislocate from the former way of life and assimilate into the new university culture. This causes an internal conflict.

Race as a factor

The issue of race and the equitable way in which rural students gain access to university is, in general, a primary axis for identity in South Africa (Bhana, 2014; Heleta, 2016). Racism is a pervasive feature in the South African context of urban universities and is therefore an important factor in identity. Bazana and Mogotsi (2017, p. 3) state:

> *Colonialism is a feature in South African universities; it helped shape specific cultural identities. The economic upper hand that came through conquest positioned the culture of the colonisers as superior, therefore rendering them Eurocentric.*

Linked to race is language and culture, family background, affluence and self-confidence and the role of supportive agents in the negotiation of identity. These are all important aspects in adjusting to university life (Yull, 2014).

Proficiency in English

English language acquisition, where there is strong parental involvement and parental affluence, affects students differently. It is a contributing factor in predicting how rural students integrate into an urban university. According to Paxton (2009, p. 2), "In South Africa, English is viewed as a language of power and status and basic interpersonal and communication skills. It is used to determine the level of academic literacy a student has".

Family background, affluence and self-efficacy

Successful completion of a degree is often associated with earlier influences, rather than with those experienced at the university (Oduaran, 2015). In terms of demographics, there are more students with higher-earning parents in urban universities, compared to those in rural areas. A study by McCracken and Barcinas, (1991, p. 30) found that adolescents from large, urban communities thought more highly of themselves than adolescents from rural communities and therefore succeeded because of increased self-efficacy, derived from parental affluence rather than parental involvement (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017, p. 3). Lack of self-efficacy on the other hand led to learning challenges (Swenson et al., 2008; Modipane 2011; Uleanya & Gamede, 2018).

Supportive agents

Identities are also negotiated by employing supportive agents or brokers of identity development (Modipane, 2011). In an academic institution, this can range from institutions offering bursaries and sponsorships, to lecturers and their teaching styles (Diab et al., 2015). A university's academic culture plays a significant role in helping rural students identify with the institution. Transformation of the entire university climate in terms of the culture of teaching and learning, curriculum, finance, and social and linguistic problems is important (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018). A study conducted in the USA concluded that rural students struggled to fit in at an urban university, particularly, African American students who attended predominantly white institutions in the USA. They are reported to have experienced alienation. Rural students try to acculturate by finding smaller and more intimate spaces similar to their homes. In doing so, they negate being part of the bigger institution and lose out on the opportunities and power that comes with links to larger associations (Christiaens, 2015; Swenson et al., 2008; Modipane, 2011; Uleanya & Gamede, 2018).

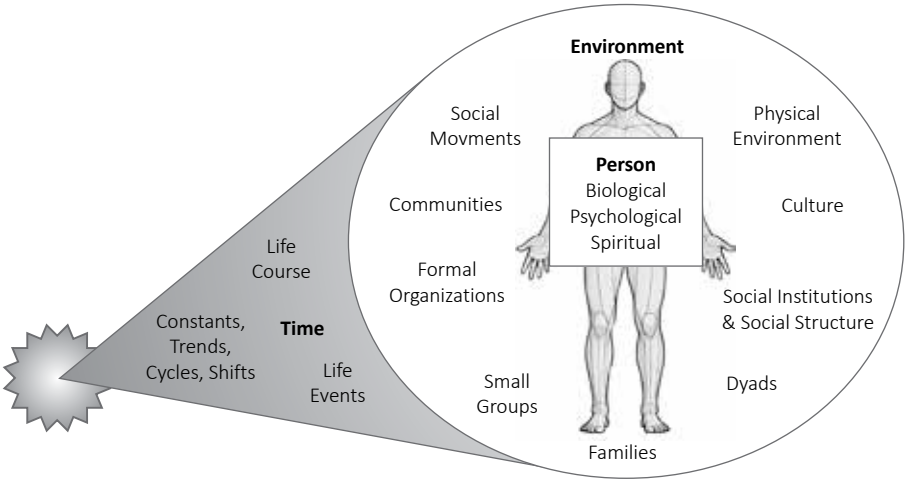
Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the life course theory of development, which provides a multifaceted approach to define the transition of students holistically, focusing on changes in ones' social life over time. Such transitions and trajectories are characterised by multiple, simultaneous roles that are played by an individual. These are described as social pathways. The changing interpersonal relationships experienced during transitions are known as social convoys (Ahier & Moore, 2002).

Life course theory is an important lens through which to view and understand the transition of rural students from a rural setting to an urban setting. As students make the transition, there is an intersection between social pathways and social convoys. Social pathways are institutionalised paths or the historical forces that are entrenched in the rules, regulations, norms and standards that society follows. They are shaped and structured by social institutions (Benner, 2011). As the students transition to a new environment, they are confronted with new rules and regulations which act as shocks of change that govern how they interact in the new spaces. They therefore need to adapt their social convoys (interpersonal relationships) in order to ensure harmony with

the new spaces. The disassociation from communal ties and the attachment to new relationships formed at university or in learning to adapt to living between different social environments results in a shifting of students' social convoys (Benner, 2011; Ahier & Moore, 2002; Dannefer, 2003).

Figure 1: Life course theory of development



Source: Hunt (2010)

Research strategy

The study was conducted using a meta-theoretical paradigm known as social constructivism; this is based on several assumptions. The first is that knowledge is generated through social interaction, interpretation and understanding, and cannot be separated from the social environment in which it occurs (Bruce et al., 2016). The second assumption of social constructivism is that the socialisation of individuals has a strong influence on how they perceive their world, therefore knowledge is a construction of individuals (Larochelle & Bednarz, 1998). This means that, for individuals, meaningful knowledge and reality is construed through interactions with others. The methodological paradigm of the study was the qualitative approach. This research relied on the participants' views of the phenomena and a pattern of a theory of meanings generated from the participants' views. The study is descriptive in nature and data were inductively collected. (Bentley et al., 2015).

Sampling and sample size

A purposive sample was used for the study. Third- and fourth-year students within a Faculty of Education at an urban university were purposively sampled because of assumed lived experiences and were viewed as capable of providing sufficient rich data for the study. Respondents were selected on the basis of their home addresses as reflected in the faculty registration database. Their home address was used as an

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indicator of whether or not the students came from the deep rural parts of South Africa. Those residing in the deep rural parts of South Africa had a general dealer address and did not have street names and numbers as their home address. This led to 12 respondents in their early twenties, of whom the eldest was 30 years of age. There was no need to extend the sources of data beyond the group that had experienced the urban university (Petrova et al., 2016).

Data collection strategies

Semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and participants reflections were used to elicit data about the phenomenon. (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Focus group interviews were useful because respondents can agree or disagree and build up on each other's arguments. Participant reflections comprised of summaries of how respondents constructed and negotiated their identity within the institution. This was done to elicit more in-depth, personal accounts of respondents' identity formation processes while at university (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019).

Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations that were followed for this study range from securing access to the research site, following procedures regarding informed consent and confidentiality, and protecting participants from harm. As researchers with histories working in historically disadvantaged institutions, it was important to avoid the potential exploitation of staff and students because of the researchers' positions. To protect the vulnerability of the students, the lead researcher chose a site based on authorities' commitment to providing access and a rigorous ethical clearance application process from the site institution. The participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and the risks involved in participating in it and were reassured that those risks would be minimised. Respondents were informed they were free to withdraw their participation at any time during the process. Informed consent and confidentiality forms were signed by the respondents.

Limitations of the study

Although the study is an in-depth investigation of students' experiences, it must be viewed with the context that the research site is located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Specifically, in a metropolitan area which is under-developed compared to other areas of South Africa, such as the Gauteng and Western Cape Provinces.

Discussion

The research was conducted in 2022, which marked twenty-eight years since South Africa held its first democratic election. The respondents belonged to the generation commonly known as 'born-frees', and this was evident in the way they neither focused on nor emphasised the apartheid-era practice of categorising identity along racial lines. They described their identity in terms of processes, memories, knowledge and experiences of their background environments. The discussion below indicated that individuals have multiple, shifting, and simultaneous identities, with a single identity

dominating at any given time, usually influenced by a strong affiliation to someone or something (Vandeyar et al., 2014).

Given the South African context, one might expect race to be a dominant feature in the respondents' identity discussion; however, it was notably not a defining factor of their self-identity. This might indicate that they viewed it as intrinsic to them, and as therefore not worth mentioning. They focused on self-identification by place, background, values, principles, poverty, possessions and community. Only three of the twelve respondents mentioned race as a defining factor. One message was consistent throughout their narration: that the respondents received foundational values from home which subsequently informed their self-identity. When they reached university, the self-identities influenced by home adjusted slightly, without loss of their foundational identities. New identities were constituted in the new environment, influenced by ideals, values and lessons from the new community.

Most of the respondents came from the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, both of which are dominated by the traditional home languages of isiXhosa and isiZulu, respectively, and the rural communities of which are populated predominantly by black Africans. The respondents therefore self-identified as Xhosa or Zulu. Their identities were constituted as a common feeling of not wanting to lose who they already were in the new environment. They described their identity as originating in their communities. Hlumi, a 22-year-old man from Gqeberha Farms in Eastern Cape, stated, "*My community back home lacks hope, therefore, whatever I do, I always think about it – I want to restore or be the hope*." This indicated that, even at university, the respondents carried their background experiences with them, never losing sight of how they had shaped their self-identity.

The respondents also narrated that they negotiated their identity by continuing to think independently, while remaining part of the collectives that they came from. They maintained this independence by accepting differences and respecting other people's boundaries while, at the same time, embracing their immediate community. Limile, a 21-year-old woman from Sepetu Administration Area in the Eastern Cape, expressed it in this way:

> *At residence I had to learn and adapt to house rules and residence rules, not fighting, not inviting strangers into the shared spaces. Respect for others was key.*

Data from respondents presented mixed values, beliefs, imaginings, views and experiences. The new world of the university needed to be negotiated differently if they were to fit in. They recounted their journey of learning and re-learning their identities, and of trying to find their own spaces in the new environment. After having done so, they had to adjust their understandings of identity and learn to embrace differences in attitudes to gender for example. According to Pam, a 20-year-old student:

> *I struggled. The change of environment took a toll on me. I had to adjust to new social rules that I had never believed in. For example, homosexuality was taboo where I grew up. Now, I was surrounded by people who perceived it as normal.*

There was a need to negotiate their work ethic, gained through socialisation and influenced by teachers and personal goals. From the respondents' accounts, some of their backgrounds and foundational values transcended home and community boundaries and were re-affirmed in the new environment. Some values were important for continued success at university, as well for acceptance in the academic environment. Lisa, a fourth-year female student from Flagstaff in the Eastern Cape, expressed this as follows:

> *Although there are few educated people in my background, I had successfully identified with those, I resolved to continue my studies and to be like them. As a result, every year of my four years, I am registered and continuing with my studies. Commitment to my studies and working hard pushed me and motivated me.*

In dealing with their fear of the unknown, and of failure and inadequacy stemming from being in an unfamiliar environment, and in overcoming cultural dissonance, the respondents realised that they had to negotiate their way through these fears and move towards acceptance. One such fear was of the new environment in general. An example was the fear of the buildings and the size of the lecture halls. Zama, a 22-year-old woman from Mangquzu Location in Eastern Cape, commented, "*Where I come from there is no development, so seeing the big buildings and robots were a little bit scary for me*."

Financial support was one of the most important factors that caused students to identify with an urban university. Without financial support, the respondents claimed they would have suffered an identity crisis, since they already perceived the institution as catering for the rich. Pinky, a 24-year-old woman from Bensonville Village in the Eastern Cape, stated,

> *The University is supportive because I found a place to stay (student accommodation) and they helped me with NSFAS.[3] Now I see myself as part of the University, I no longer see myself differently from other students.*

In analysing data from this research, the aim was to present a nuanced account of respondent's answers to each question, outlining their perspectives on the meanings they brought to their institution and the meanings they ascribed to acceptance and belonging (Gibau, 2015). The themes in the table below emerged from the data.

Table 1: Emerging themes

Themes	
Foundational identities	
Theme 1	Self-Identification
Theme 2	Remaining grounded in who we are
Theme 3	A deepened sense of responsibility for our communities

3 The National Student Financial Aid Scheme, a government entity providing financial aid to South African students.

Themes	
Negotiated identities	
Theme 4	Overcoming misconceptions about an urban university
Institutional culture	
Theme 5	Learning to straddle between the two worlds
Identity brokering structures	
Theme 6	The influence of university communal structures

Results

Rural students self-identified by navigating new interpersonal relationships at the urban university. They sought the familiarity of communal ties, and it did not matter the race or background of those they formed communities with, but what mattered was how they experienced a sense of identity and belonging, some in the personal struggles they experienced with their newly found communities daily or in the processes of learning to adjust to the unfamiliar infrastructure and buildings. This they had to do to adjust in the new urban environment while remaining grounded in the values and beliefs inherent to their community background.

Socio-cultural circumstances

Rural students constituted their identities by retaining a deep sense of responsibility for their communities. This stemmed from their foundational identity of being black, poor and disadvantaged. This identity is also influenced by socio-cultural circumstances of emanating from homogenic cultural communities.

Financial security

Identity was also constituted through financial security. The new environment (university) required a different level of financial security. To identify, students needed to be free of the financial burdens of their rural environment and be able to afford being at an urban university.

Cultural dissonance

The students also identified by learning to handle cultural shocks such as the modernity of the campus, the styles of teaching and the way in which students engaged with one another which was different from their upbringing, whilst at the same time remaining grounded in the values embedded through their up-bringing. Cultural dissonance emerged as a result of learning to straddle the two worlds.

Relationships

Identities were also constituted in the way the respondents' felt affinities with certain socio-cultural aspects of the urban university, for example, the relationships they chose to pursue. They identified with what they had seen, observed and been taught, which was manifest in the attitudes they adopted towards the people with whom they associated. A large part of the association was influenced by university brokering

structures and communal societies, thus rural students negotiated their identities through adopting new social convoys.

Changing roles

Respondents also constituted their identities within the urban university by shifting their roles and obligations, as they previously conceived them, and assuming new roles within their background communities. Their self-perceptions evolved from being students to being contributors and role-models in their communities. Latterly, they perceived their roles as having shifted from being recipients of their home cultures and community values and practices to being shapers and contributors to the development of their communities.

Learning and re-learning

The respondents negotiated their identities by overcoming misconceptions about urban universities and learning to straddle the two worlds. For example, their change in perceptions of how they anticipated university freedom as opposed to how they experienced it. Freedom at an urban university is freedom with limits. Learning to adapt their previously attained values, philosophies and beliefs in order to be part of this bigger world, yet not lose the values and philosophies of their up-bringing, caused them to adopt 'hyphenated identities'. Contrary to the literature which reported rural students as trying to fit into the dominant hegemonic cultures of urban universities, the current study found that students remained grounded in their rural identities. They took on 'chameleon-like' roles, adapting their identities according to the requirements and adjusting to binary rural-urban approaches.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article explored the constitution and negotiation of rural students' identities in an urban university setting. Future research could focus on how the identities of rural students are affirmed in the curriculum, and how the way rural students negotiate their identities informs and influences institutional culture and practice at an urban university, particularly postgraduate research by students from rural backgrounds.

Ethics statement

The study was conducted in partial fulfilment of requirements for a PhD study in Education (Humanities), at the University of Pretoria. Ethical clearances to conduct the study were obtained from both the University of Pretoria and the research site university. Participation in this study was voluntary.

Potential conflict of interest

Although the lead author worked for the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) while this research was being conducted, the DHET had no further influence on this study and, therefore, the authors declare no conflict of interests.

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