



An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Experiences of a 'Black' Female Employee and Doctoral Student in Higher Education

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Abstract

This autoethnographic paper explores the lived experiences of a 'black' female employee and doctoral student within higher education spaces in post-apartheid South Africa. Anchored by personal narratives and reflexive analysis, it examines the intersections of individual aspirations, systemic inequities and cultural barriers shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies. This paper focuses on identity formation, resilience and agency within academic spaces, revealing the challenges and opportunities encountered in pursuing equity and inclusion. This paper draws on scholars such as Maria Lugones (2010) Sara Ahmed (2012; 2017) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988; 2003), who provide critical insights into structural exclusion and the systemic constraints that hinder the advancement of marginalised identities. By relying on the theoretical lens of postcolonial feminism, this paper contributes not only to understanding the unique challenges faced by a 'black' female employee and doctoral student from a marginalised group but also advocates a reimagining of institutional structures to enhance diversity, inclusion and equity, as well as amplifying marginalised voices. The findings contribute to the literature on marginalised identities in higher education spaces and offer insights that might resonate with others in a similar position.

Keywords: Autoethnography; 'black' female employee; doctoral journey; post-apartheid South Africa; identity; inclusion

Introduction

"You'll need to use your annual leave for that." These words seemed at odds with earlier assurances of institutional support and declarations that "we will support you" when I initially communicated my acceptance into the doctoral programme. From the beginning of my employment at the institution, I clearly expressed my intention to pursue doctoral studies as an integral part of my personal development plan; this is by no means an aspiration unique to me, but common among colleagues in similar positions. Yet I was never informed that study leave would not be available. This dismissive response marked one of many moments when institutional support wavered precisely when it was most needed for academic advancement. Such instances have revealed the systemic inequities and the complex intersections of race, gender and power that have shaped my experience as a 'black' female

employee and doctoral student in higher education.

The term 'black' is used to highlight its socially constructed nature while acknowledging its deep-rooted social and institutional significance. This conceptualisation draws on Steve Biko's Black Consciousness philosophy, which defined 'black' not merely as a racial category, but as a political identity encompassing all groups oppressed under apartheid (Biko, 1987). These groups included African, Coloured and Indian/Asian populations. Biko's definition emphasised that "being black is not a matter of pigmentation - being black is a reflection of a mental attitude" (Biko, 1987, p. 48) This perspective rejects the fragmentation imposed by apartheid's racial classifications and instead embraces a unified identity of resistance against oppression. This study locates individual experiences within South Africa's broader historical and political contexts of resistance and transformation. In contemporary South Africa,

'black' remains relevant as a category in higher education institutions, which continue to reflect historical patterns of exclusion despite formal policies of transformation.

As a 'black' female employee and doctoral candidate, my lived experiences provide a critical perspective for examining institutional inequities and barriers to advancement. My dual role as employee and student bridges academic and administrative domains, making my narrative particularly appropriate for exploring systemic barriers. This positionality aligns with postcolonial feminist approaches, which emphasise personal narratives as essential tools for critiquing structures of exclusion (Mohanty, 1988).

Closer reflection on similar encounters bolstered by conversations with other aspiring academics and postgraduate students reveals the entrenched dynamics of marginalisation. These experiences are not merely echoes of historical inequities, but are manifestations of persistent colonial legacies that shape contemporary institutional practices. Despite proclaimed support, systemic inequities often emerge as opaque policies and practices that sideline voice like mine. This narrative critically examines these dynamics through an account of my journey as both a Professional Administrative Support Staff (PASS)¹ member and an emerging scholar.

The legacy of apartheid has left South African universities with deeply entrenched racial and gender hierarchies to this day. The Employment Equity Act (Republic of South Africa, 1998) marked an attempt to redress these imbalances, but its uneven implementation highlighted persistent challenges. Institutions that were historically advantaged under apartheid continue to dominate resources and prestige, and perpetuate systemic inequities (Badat, 2008; Boshoff, 2005).

Despite transformation policies, systemic barriers persist, especially for Professional Administrative Support Staff (PASS). The under-representation of marginalised women in senior academic positions remains a significant challenge

(Mdleleni et al., 2021). PASS members often navigate exclusionary institutional cultures, where their contributions are undervalued and their aspirations are dismissed.

My introduction to the institution was marked by pronounced hostile encounters that foreshadowed the systemic challenges ahead. Within weeks of starting my role, I was berated during my lunch break for an issue I could not have known about. In another instance, I was called to a colleague's office to experience a similar confrontational situation with senior staff who demanded knowledge of institutional processes that I could not possibly have possessed as a new employee. In another instance, a male colleague took it upon himself to 'educate me on 'how things are done around here'. He insisted on calling me "Sweetheart", to which I responded as professionally as possible, firmly requesting that he address me by my name or surname. I remained persistent and eventually he conceded and began addressing me appropriately. These encounters felt like informal initiation rites, designed to establish my place within the institutional hierarchy, where 'knowing my place' as an administrative staff member was implied.

As time progressed, I assumed additional responsibilities despite my administrative appointment. When I expressed an interest in teaching modules and followed the appropriate procedures, my intentions were questioned. While I ultimately secured an opportunity to teach, this progress was short lived. Within a year, I was informed that I could no longer teach because of my administrative role, even though there were no complaints or issues with my performance. More telling was a comment about my incomplete Master's degree being potentially problematic, despite others with lower qualifications teaching similar modules. This inconsistency underscores the manifestation of systemic inequities in decision making and resource allocation.

Departmental meetings became spaces of marginalisation, where my contributions were often disregarded because of my PASS status,

¹PASS members constitute a distinct category of university employees, who provide essential administrative, technical and professional services, often

navigating complex power dynamics within the academic hierarchy.

while other colleagues' ideas dominated the conversations. During one meeting which I had set up to address academic concerns with key academic staff, a colleague offered unsolicited advice on how I should "conduct myself" as an administrator. This dismissive attitude silences meaningful dialogue and reinforces the culture of exclusion.

I faced significant challenges balancing the chaotic demands of my poorly defined administrative role with my aspirations for academic growth. The lack of clear processes and boundaries exacerbated student frustrations, often misdirected toward me. This overwhelming workload ultimately led to burnout and a temporary medical leave of absence. Later periods brought temporary relief through additional support staff, but this assistance was withdrawn because of "limited funding" – a common justification that disproportionately affects marginalised staff members.

When seeking guidance on transitioning into an academic role, I approached senior leadership with evidence of my academic contributions. However, their response was a chuckle dismissing my aspirations, further entrenching the systemic marginalisation of 'black' female academics. This incident exemplifies on a banal, everyday level how colonial legacies continue to shape perceptions of capability and potential in higher education.

My experience underscores the urgent need for genuine transformation in higher education. Transformation entails dismantling systemic inequities, fostering inclusive cultures and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities (Badat, 2016). PASS members, often excluded from institutional decision making, must be integrated into broader attempts to promote diversity and inclusion. By situating my narrative within the broader discourse of race, gender and power, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to deconstruct systemic inequities and advocate for meaningful changes.

This autoethnographic exploration highlights the nuanced ways in which institutional cultures perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation. My personal journey, which has been marked by resilience, identity negotiation and systemic

barriers, reflects the broader struggles faced by 'black' female employees and PASS members in higher education.

This autoethnographic study examines the lived experiences of a 'Black' female employee and doctoral student navigating higher education spaces in post-apartheid South Africa. It analyses how institutional policies and practices perpetuate systemic inequities for marginalised staff while also exploring the strategies of resilience and resistance they employ. Furthermore, the study contributes to the scholarly understanding of transformation challenges in South African higher education.

The primary aim is to investigate the impact of institutional policies and practices on the professional development and academic advancement of 'Black' female professional administrative and support staff (PASS) members. It examines how these institutional structures shape career progression and access to opportunities within higher education.

To achieve this aim, the study has key objectives. First, it explores how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary higher education structures and cultures, perpetuating systemic barriers for marginalised individuals. Second, it identifies the strategies of resilience and resistance employed by Black female PASS members and other marginalized groups as they navigate exclusionary academic spaces. Lastly, the study investigates how personal narratives can serve as a catalyst for institutional transformation, contributing to efforts aimed at fostering greater equity and inclusion within higher education.

As Mohanty (1988) argues, such experiences reflect systemic patterns of exclusion shaped by historical and socioeconomic dynamics that continue to inform institutional practices. By critically examining these experiences, this study sought to illuminate the intersections of race, gender and power, contributing to the collective pursuit of equity and inclusion within the academy.

Institutional Context and Historical Background

The transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa marked a pivotal moment in the country's higher education landscape, with

legislative changes aimed at redressing historical imbalances. The Employment Equity Act (Republic of South Africa, 1998) sought to increase diversity and representation among academic staff members. Despite these initiatives, systemic inequities remain. Historically advantaged institutions continue to dominate in terms of resources and prestige, while historically disadvantaged institutions grapple with limited funding and infrastructure (Badat, 2008; Boshoff, 2005; du Pisani, 2023).

Transformation efforts, such as equity quotas and diversity policies, have made strides towards increasing the representation of 'black' students and staff. However, transformation in South African higher education, referring to attempts at dismantling systemic inequalities rooted in apartheid (Badat, 2016), still faces significant challenges. These include under-representation of 'black' women in senior academic positions, underscoring the persistent barriers erected by race and gender (Mdleleni et al., 2021). For instance, 'black' female academics often face dual marginalisation on the basis of race and gender, leaving them to navigate institutional cultures that frequently overlook their contributions and reinforce exclusionary practices.

To address these shortcomings, the South African government introduced the Employment Equity Act (1998) and initiatives such as the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF), which includes programmes such as the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). The Employment Equity Act aims to combat workplace discrimination and requires institutions to implement affirmative action measures to redress historical inequities (Archibong & Adejumo, 2013). However, scholars have criticized the uneven implementation of this Act in higher education, noting that resource constraints, historical legacies and weak enforcement mechanisms hinder its effectiveness (Archibong & Adejumo, 2013; Geldenhuys, 2020; Gururaj et al., 2021; Portnoi, 2003).

The SSAUF, launched in 2015, focuses on addressing the systemic under-representation of women and black academics. Its nGAP programme has created opportunities for early career academics to gain entry into academia;

however, retention remains a challenge, with 23% of participants leaving the academy (Borotho, 2023; Hlengwa, 2019). This underscores the need for stronger institutional support and career development pathways.

In historically advantaged institutions, colonial legacies manifest through subtle mechanisms of exclusion, such as unwritten rules about whose voices carry weight in decision making. These dynamics highlight how institutional cultures perpetuate systemic inequities while claiming to be transformed, thus necessitating a nuanced understanding of these complex power structures. Furthermore, the DHET 2019 Employment Equity Policy highlighted the importance of change management, organizational culture shifts and diversity management as measures to complement legislative frameworks. Despite these efforts, the entrenched patriarchal and Eurocentric cultures in universities often perpetuate marginalisation and hinder the career progression of 'black' female academics (Schultz & Rankhumise, 2023). These issues highlight the intersectionality of race, gender and institutional power in shaping academic experiences, demanding a holistic approach to transformation.

Theoretical framework: post-colonial feminism

Postcolonial feminism provides a critical framework for understanding the persistence of colonial legacies within higher education structures. By emphasising intersectionality, this framework highlights the compounded barriers faced by 'black' women - barriers anchored in race, gender and institutional hierarchies (Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2003).

This study adopts a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework to explore the lived experiences of 'black' women navigating South African higher education spaces, emphasising the interplay of systemic inequities, resilience and resistance strategies. By combining postcolonialism and third-world feminism, this study addresses the complex intersection of gender, race, class and colonial history. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of 'black' female academics in postcolonial contexts, challenging both patriarchal structures and the lingering effects of

colonialism simultaneously. It foregrounds the agency of 'black' women in resisting exclusionary practices and advocating for social justice, diversity and gender equality.

Central to this framework is Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1988; 2003) critique of Western feminist scholarship, which challenges the homogenisation of women's identities and emphasises the importance of contextualising experiences within specific socio-historical and cultural frameworks. Mohanty's insights are particularly relevant in South Africa, where racial and gendered hierarchies are deeply entrenched in the institutional culture. Her insistence on deconstructing the "third world woman" as a monolithic figure is essential for understanding the unique positionality of 'black' women within South Africa's post-apartheid academic institutions, where colonial and apartheid legacies persist. This perspective reveals how ostensibly neutral policies, such as study leave policies, often reinforce historical patterns of marginalisation by inconsistently applying and disproportionately disadvantaging marginalised staff. These frameworks illuminate the compounded challenges faced by 'black' women, where race, gender and professional roles intersect to amplify systemic barriers.

Building on these critiques, Lugones's (2010) notion of the "coloniality of power" sheds light on how colonial hierarchies are sustained within contemporary institutions. This concept is particularly useful for understanding South African institutions of higher education, where seemingly neutral policies continue to disadvantage marginalised groups. Lugones emphasises the dual positioning of marginalised individuals as both essential and expendable – a duality that resonates with the experiences of 'black' women in academia. These women are often essential for meeting institutional goals, but are excluded from meaningful opportunities for professional advancement, highlighting the nuanced and often contradictory dynamics of intersectionality. The experiences of black female professional administrative support staff (PASS) further illustrate this dynamic, as they are positioned lower within the institutional hierarchy, limiting their access to academic progression and decision-making spaces.

Further complicating these dynamics is the subtle yet pervasive operation of structural barriers, which Sara Ahmed (2012) refers to as "institutional walls." Ahmed's concept illustrates how resistance to systemic inequities is often framed as hostility or defiance, leading to the silencing of those who advocate for equity. This is particularly relevant in South African higher education, where calls for clarity and fairness in institutional policies are frequently met by hostility or dismissal. For example, my own experiences of being silenced during departmental meetings and encountering resistance when advocating for policy clarity highlight how institutions maintain entrenched hierarchies through exclusionary practices and resistance to change. Ahmed (2017) also discusses the emotional labour involved in resisting marginalisation, underscoring how black women must navigate institutional exclusion through resilience strategies such as creating support networks, mentorship and alternative spaces for knowledge production.

Despite these challenges, 'black' women have demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency in countering systemic oppression. Collins's (2000) framework on 'black' feminist thought underscores the importance of both personal and collective resources in navigating and resisting institutional constraints. These strategies, which include fostering solidarity, creating supportive spaces and advocating transformative policies, are central to the ways in which 'black' women assert their agency and challenge systemic exclusion. By focusing on these acts of resistance, this study highlights not only the barriers faced by 'black' women in higher education, but also their capacity to envision and enact change.

Postcolonial feminism critiques the ways in which colonial power structures continue to shape knowledge production, institutional hierarchies and access to opportunities in higher education. It challenges the Eurocentric norms that define academic legitimacy, often marginalising non-Western epistemologies and experiences. In the context of this study, postcolonial feminism allows for an analysis of how colonial legacies persist through exclusionary policies, implicit biases and the devaluation of knowledge produced by black women in academia. Ahmed's (2012)

notion of 'institutional walls' provides further insight into the resistance that marginalised individuals face when advocating for change. It illustrates how institutional cultures reinforce exclusion by normalising inequitable practices, framing the pursuit of equity as disruptive rather than necessary. This aligns with the experiences explored in this study, where 'black' women encounter systemic barriers disguised as administrative protocols, workload distribution, and interpretations of opaque policies.

Postcolonial feminism also provides tools to examine the emotional labour involved in resisting marginalisation. As Ahmed (2017) discusses, navigating institutional exclusion often requires resilience strategies, including the creation of support networks, mentorship, and alternative spaces for knowledge production. By engaging with these concepts, this study explores how 'black' female doctoral students and employees develop strategies of survival and resistance in higher education, ultimately contributing to broader discussions on institutional transformation and epistemic justice.

In South African higher education, this perspective is particularly valuable for understanding how academic spaces can evolve to better support 'black' female academics. Recognising the nuanced and intersectional challenges they face is a crucial step toward adopting strategies that move beyond tokenistic inclusion and creating spaces that are both equitable and inclusive. By foregrounding the resilience, resistance and transformative potential of 'black' women, postcolonial feminism provides the tools to critique systemic inequities while envisioning a more just and representative scholarly community. This study engages with postcolonial feminist theory to explore the ways in which colonial legacies manifest in contemporary higher education structures and cultures, directly addressing one of the key objectives. Furthermore, it examines how these legacies shape the experiences of 'black' female PASS members, reinforcing the need for institutional transformation initiatives.

Methodology: autoethnographic approach

Why this approach?

This study employs autoethnography as its primary methodology, because it allows for a deep exploration of personal experiences within broader sociocultural contexts, bridging the personal and systemic dimensions of academic life (Ellis, 2004; Wall, 2006). As both researcher and subject, I am uniquely positioned to critically examine the lived realities of navigating academic spaces as a 'black' female employee and doctoral student in post-apartheid South Africa. Autoethnography legitimises personal narratives as a means to interrogate systemic inequities while advocating for transformative scholarship (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Muncey, 2005).

This approach is particularly well suited to the study's focus on marginalisation and resilience in higher education, as it challenges traditional paradigms that marginalise subjective knowledge. By framing personal experiences within broader institutional and cultural contexts, autoethnography amplifies the voices of those who are often excluded from mainstream academic discourse (Ahmed, 2012; Collins, 2000).

Autoethnography is an emerging qualitative method that challenges traditional research paradigms by embracing subjectivity and acknowledging the inextricable link between personal and cultural perspectives (Wall, 2006). This approach dismantles the positivist tradition that views the researcher as a contaminant, instead emphasising the legitimacy of personal knowledge as a means of gaining deeper sociological understanding (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). By situating individual experiences within broader institutional and cultural contexts, autoethnography creates space for marginalised voices to challenge dominant knowledge systems and contribute to transformative scholarship (Muncey, 2005).

Data sources and reflexivity

The data for this study were drawn from multiple sources spanning six years of professional and academic experience.

- Personal journals and reflective writing;
- Institutional correspondence and policy documents;

- Email exchanges regarding study leave and professional development;
- Critical incident analyses.

This aligns with Duncan's (2004) methodological rigour in autoethnography, where reflective journals and supporting artefacts, such as emails, memos and institutional records, are used as primary data sources.

The process of autoethnographic enquiry is iterative and nonlinear, as described by Ellis (2004), and involves cycles of introspection, immersion in data and critical analysis. Personal reflections are complemented by theoretical frameworks such as postcolonial feminism to contextualise experiences within broader structures of power and exclusion. This dual focus on personal narrative and theoretical insight allows for a comprehensive exploration of institutional dynamics, following Holt (2003), who employed reflective logs and theoretical frameworks to connect personal experiences with systemic challenges.

Validity and rigour

Criticisms often levelled at autoethnography, such as its perceived lack of methodological rigour or reliance on subjective accounts, were addressed in this study by adhering to established practices of reflexivity, triangulation and thematic analysis (Duncan, 2004; Ellis, 2000). Personal narratives are supported by institutional documents, corroborated through critical incident analyses, and interpreted within the context of the relevant literature, ensuring credibility and dependability. As Richardson (2000) argues, the validity of autoethnography lies in its ability to evoke emotional resonance, coherence and authenticity rather than adhering to traditional scientific criteria.

Furthermore, this study adopts Ellis and Bochner's (2000) framework of integrating personal narrative with theoretical analysis to create a "social scientific art form" that bridges the gap between the personal and the cultural. This methodological approach acknowledges the subjective nature of the research process, while maintaining rigorous documentation and analysis to provide meaningful insights.

Ethical considerations

Given the personal nature of autoethnography, ethical considerations are of paramount importance. This study adhered to ethical guidelines by ensuring anonymity wherever necessary, and maintaining transparency in reflexive writing. The autoethnographic process itself serves as a form of ethical engagement, as it foregrounds the researcher's positionality and acknowledges the power dynamics inherent in the research process (Ellis, 2004).

In summary, the autoethnographic methodology employed in this study allows for a nuanced and critical exploration of the lived experiences of a 'black' female employee and doctoral student in South African higher education. By combining personal narrative, reflexive analysis and theoretical insight, this approach contributes to the understanding of systemic inequities and possibilities for institutional transformation.

Findings

Navigating systemic and institutional barriers

My six-year journey through institutional spaces has revealed multiple layers of systemic barriers, most notably in the realm of interpreting and implementing institutional policy.

A pivotal example emerges from my experience with the study leave policy as a PASS member pursuing doctoral studies. Despite the institution's stated commitment to professional development, I encountered what Ahmed (2012) describes as the "brick wall" of institutional resistance through inconsistent policy interpretation. This shifting interpretation signals systemic inequities and reinforces institutional barriers, particularly for 'black' women striving for academic advancement.

The disparity in the application of study leave policies creates significant obstacles for the PASS members. While 24 study leave days are stipulated in the HR system, accessibility to this leave is governed by unwritten rules and subjective interpretations. Initially approved for study leave in early 2023, I later faced rejection for similar requests, being told that study leave was "reserved exclusively for staff writing exams."

This shifting interpretation signals systemic inequities and reinforces institutional barriers, particularly for 'black' women who strive for academic advancement.

While some colleagues faced no issues accessing their entitlement to study leave days, others, including myself, encountered resistance and shifting policy interpretations. My initial approvals created an expectation of institutional support, only to be denied later under narrow and exclusionary policy interpretations. This inconsistency demonstrates how institutional policies can serve as mechanisms of exclusion, particularly for marginalised groups.

The psychological toll of navigating these barriers manifests in several ways:

- Anxiety over requesting legitimate academic support;
- Physical exhaustion from constantly needing to justify my academic pursuits;
- A sense of professional isolation when discovering differential treatment among colleagues;
- Mental fatigue from documenting and advocating for policy clarity.

For six years, I navigated a role characterised by unclear responsibilities and a toxic work environment. My efforts to seek clarity in reporting lines were often met with hostility, leaving me feeling undermined and isolated. One particularly challenging episode involved a manager's refusal to approve study leave, escalating into a humiliating meeting where I was questioned about the processes I had never been trained on. This experience was yet another instance of encountering the "brick wall" of institutional resistance (Ahmed, 2012).

Beyond policy barriers, my experiences during departmental meetings further emphasised my professional isolation. Despite presenting relevant insights, my contributions were often dismissed, while those of my academic colleagues were prioritised. This disregard perpetuates a culture in which professional and administrative roles are undervalued, reinforcing a hierarchical structure that marginalises non-academic voices.

The culmination of these experiences led to a period of reflection in mid-2023. By then, the combination of microaggression, passive-aggressive communication and lack of institutional support I encountered necessitated medical leave. This forced withdrawal provided a critical space to reflect on the pervasive nature of systemic oppression and its impact on mental health. This journey underscored the urgent need for clear, equitable policies and a cultural shift that valued diverse contributions within institutional spaces.

Personal and professional implications

The challenges I faced in accessing study leave extended beyond policy interpretations; they also reflect broader systemic barriers that disproportionately impact on 'black' women in higher education. As a 'black' woman pursuing doctoral studies, I found myself navigating a structure that seemed to curtail my academic and professional development, while simultaneously promoting itself as an institution of learning.

These systemic challenges also manifested as microaggressions and passive-aggressive communication, which severely impacted my mental health. For example, receiving dismissive or hostile responses to enquiries about study leave policies creates a feeling of professional invalidation. Over time, the stress and anxiety of navigating these challenges led to physical exhaustion and burnout, culminating in a month-long medical leave. The psychological toll of navigating these barriers includes anxiety over requesting legitimate academic support, professional isolation and mental fatigue from advocating for policy clarity.

The lack of institutional support for PASS members pursuing advanced degrees raises critical questions regarding equity and inclusion. Why are the professional development needs of PASS members treated as secondary to those of the academic staff? How does this perpetuate the existing hierarchies within an institution? Most importantly, how can an institution better align its policies with its stated commitment to fostering growth and learning for all employees?

Policy as a site of struggle

Through discussions with colleagues, I detected a pattern of inconsistent policy application. Although some PASS members received full support in their doctoral studies, others faced similar barriers to my own. This disparity highlights how institutional policies, rather than serving as neutral guidelines, often function as sites of power negotiation and systemic inequity. The experience aligns with Lugones's (2010) concept of the "coloniality of power", where institutional structures perpetuate historical patterns of exclusion through seemingly neutral administrative processes.

Resilience and resistance strategies

Despite these challenges, I developed multiple strategies for resistance and survival. Drawing from Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) work on 'black' feminist thought, I recognized that resilience requires both external resistance and internal nurturing. Four key strategies emerged for me.

Faith as anchor

Faith was the cornerstone of my resilience throughout this journey, entailing reflection on passages such as Isaiah 43:2-5:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. 3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. 4 Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life. 5 Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. (Holy Bible, 1984 Isaiah 43:2-5)

I found strength in believing that my challenges were not insurmountable. Prayers became both a refuge and a rallying cry, grounding my work in a purpose beyond immediate circumstances. My faith provided not only solace, but also a sense of purpose that allowed me to persevere through systemic challenges.

Network building

In accordance with Ahmed's (2017) concept of "companionship in struggle," I actively cultivated relationships with supportive colleagues and mentors. These connections have proved to be invaluable and provide practical guidance and emotional validation. They confirmed that my experiences were not isolated incidents, but were part of broader systemic patterns of marginalisation. The support I received from these networks reinforces my belief that collective strength can transform individual struggles into meaningful resistance.

Policy advocacy

My advocacy extended beyond addressing individual concerns to tackling systemic gaps in policy and practice. A notable example is my advocacy for the revised study leave benefits for Professional Administrative Support Staff (PASS). This involved maintaining a detailed documentation of all institutional communications, engaging with colleagues facing similar challenges, and developing evidence-based arguments for policy reform.

For instance, I emphasised the need for clarity in study leave policies and their equitable application across staff categories. Although progress has been made, such as proposed amendments allowing PASS members to use study leave for doctoral studies research, these changes remain subject to lengthy governance and approval processes. This initiative aligns with Lugones's vision of decolonial resistance, demonstrating how collective action can disrupt exclusionary institutional norms.

Strategic documentation and advocacy

Strategic documentation has become a critical tool for advancing institutional reforms. By systematically recording all interactions and communications regarding study leave policies, I built a solid foundation for advocacy. My approach included:

- Maintaining detailed records of all policy-related communications;
- Building networks with similarly affected colleagues;
- Identifying and utilizing formal channels for policy review; and

- Developing evidence-based arguments for policy reform.

This strategy has proven crucial for advocating equitable access to professional development opportunities. For example, the proposed policy amendments now include provisions for PASS members to use study leave for doctoral studies research. While these reforms are still in progress, they mark a significant step toward equity and inclusion.

Through these strategies, faith, network building, policy advocacy and strategic documentation, I not only navigated institutional challenges but also contributed to broader conversations about equity and inclusion in higher education. These efforts exemplify the necessary resilience and agency, showing how marginalised individuals can transform adversity into advocacy for systemic change.

Discussion

Recommendations for Institutional Transformation

The data for this study were drawn from multiple sources spanning six years of professional experience and two years of academic experience:

- Personal journals and reflective writing;
- Institutional correspondence and policy documents;
- Email exchanges regarding study leave and professional development;
- Minutes of meetings and performance management documentation;
- Critical incident analyses;
- Institutional policies and their interpretations across departments.

This rich collection of data provides a comprehensive view of both personal experiences and institutional dynamics. The analysis of institutional documents and correspondence proved particularly valuable for understanding how policies can function as mechanisms of exclusion, even when framed in apparently neutral language. Mohanty's (1988) notion of the politics

of location emphasises the need to situate these reflective narratives within broader systemic frameworks. This is especially critical in the context of historically privileged institutions, where historical legacies and contemporary challenges intersect, as evidenced by contested transformation initiatives and ongoing issues related to inclusivity and equity.

The data for this study were collected in accordance with Duncan's (2004) concept of methodological rigour in autoethnography, where reflective journals and supporting artefacts such as emails, memos and institutional records are used as primary data sources. These data sources were analysed through thematic categorisation and critical reflection to identify and explore recurring patterns of systemic inequities, cultural barriers and personal resilience strategies.

The process of autoethnographic inquiry is iterative and nonlinear, as described by Ellis (2004), involving cycles of introspection, immersion in data and critical analysis. Personal reflections are complemented by theoretical frameworks, such as postcolonial feminism, to contextualize my experiences within broader structures of power and exclusion. This dual focus on personal narratives and theoretical insights allows for a comprehensive exploration of institutional dynamics. Following Holt (2003), who employed reflective logs and theoretical frameworks to connect personal experiences with systemic challenges, this study bridges the personal and systemic dimensions of academic life.

By adopting a reflexive approach, this study situates individual experiences within the broader institutional and historical contexts that shape them. Reflexivity allows for a critical examination of the way that historical legacies, such as colonial and patriarchal systems, persist in shaping contemporary academic environments. This aligns with the emphasis on situated knowledge as articulated by Haraway (1988), in which the researcher's positionality becomes a framework for interrogating systemic inequities and envisioning transformative possibilities.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study not only highlight systemic inequities, but also provide a basis for actionable recommendations aimed at fostering inclusivity and equity within academic institutions. To address these challenges, I offer a number of proposals.

1. Policy Reform: Institutions should ensure that policies such as study leave and professional development opportunities are applied consistently across all staff categories. This requires clear guidelines and transparent accountability mechanisms.

2. Mentorship Programmes: Establishing mentorship networks for marginalised staff at departmental level can help foster a sense of belonging and provide crucial support for professional and academic advancement (Collins, 2000).

3. Decolonising Curricula: Institutions must prioritise the inclusion of diverse epistemologies and perspectives in their curricula, reflecting South Africa's broader social transformation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

4. Anti-bias Training: Regular training sessions on unconscious bias and diversity can help create more inclusive departmental and institutional cultures.

Conclusion

This autoethnographic exploration reveals how personal experiences of marginalisation and resistance contribute to understanding broader patterns of institutional inequality. By interweaving personal narratives with critical reflection and theoretical analysis, my story illuminates the persistent challenges facing 'black' female academics, Professional, Administrative Support Staff (PASS) members and doctoral students. It also highlights the transformative potential of both individual and collective actions to address these challenges.

Through the integration of postcolonial feminist theory, this study critiques the systemic inequities embedded within institutions of higher education, emphasising how these structures perpetuate exclusion and undermine the agency of marginalised individuals. Drawing on the

frameworks posited by Mohanty (1988, 2003) and Lugones (2010), this study examines how intersecting identities – shaped by race, gender, class and positionality within the academy – create unique experiences of both marginalisation and resistance. These frameworks provide a nuanced perspective for exploring how such identities live and navigate within institutional spaces that often reproduce the colonial and patriarchal hierarchies.

My narrative bridges two critical vantage points within the university, that of a doctoral student and a PASS member. This dual perspective sheds light on the overlapping challenges faced by marginalised individuals at different levels of institutional engagement. For instance, as a staff member, I confront the structural devaluation of PASS roles, which are often relegated to the periphery of academic discourse on transformation. Simultaneously, as a doctoral student, I navigate the complexities of academic gatekeeping, where implicit biases and systemic barriers persist, despite policy commitments to equity and inclusion.

By situating these personal experiences within the broader context of post-apartheid South African academia, this study explores how historical legacies of exclusion continue to manifest. It underscores the resilience required to thrive in such environments, where survival often necessitates not only individual perseverance, but also the forging of solidarities across different institutional roles. Feminist solidarity emerged as a key theme, advocating for alliances that transcend hierarchical boundaries and create spaces for collective empowerment and advocacy.

This study makes a significant contribution to existing scholarship by offering detailed, lived insights into the experience of navigating academic institutions from a marginalised position. It highlights the systemic obstacles faced by 'black' female academics, PASS members and students, while also identifying strategies for challenging these structures. These strategies include fostering inclusive institutional cultures, implementing meaningful equity-driven policies, and supporting the personal and professional development of marginalised individuals.

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on marginalised identities in higher education, particularly focusing on the under-explored experiences of PASS members. By illuminating systemic barriers and strategies for resilience, this study offers insights into the possibilities of policy reform and institutional transformation.

Ultimately, this work serves as both a critique of existing inequities and a call to action for education institutions committed to genuine transformation. It hopes to inspire theoretical understanding and collective solidarity, urging institutions to reimagine their practices and structures to create environments in which all individuals, regardless of their positionality, can thrive. Through personal narrative and theoretical reflection, this study amplifies the voices of the marginalised while envisioning pathways toward a more inclusive and equitable academic future.

Disclosures

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

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