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Academic identities of South African black women professors: A multiple case study

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Background: Literature on the academic identities of South African black women in higher education institutions predominantly focuses more on students and academics in general and less on professors. Studying the academic identities of black women is important in understanding how their reality in higher education is constructed and professors are particularly important to study as their leadership position can shape the types of opportunities and challenges they and others encounter.

Aim: This article aimed to explore the academic identities of five black women professors in two South African universities and what influences them. This study uses empowerment theory to understand the way these five black women academic professors see themselves academically and what informs the way they see themselves academically.

Setting: The black women professors were recruited from two South African universities in 2018.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the five black women professors. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Collectively, the five participants seemed to show two academic identities: the encouraging scholarship and student learning academic identity and conducting research for (social) transformation academic identity. These identities seemed to arise from both the inspiring and discouraging encounters they had with some of their teachers and lecturers. The article has implications for policy and practice.

Conclusion: The significance of the study is that it highlights themes, which can be useful to understand how black women professors talk about their identity and understand how their reality is constructed.

Keywords: academic identities; black women; empowerment theory; professors; South African universities.

Introduction

In 1948, the South African National Party gained power and phased out traces of black participation in the central political system (Thompson 2008). For decades, the National Party had the support of the overwhelming majority of white people. The National Party applied apartheid to various laws and administrative measures. There were four main ideas embraced by the apartheid ideology. Firstly, South Africa's population was made up of four 'racial groups': white people, African, mixed race and Indian, each with its own unique culture (Thompson 2008). Secondly, as a civilised race, white people had the right to complete control of the nation. Thirdly, the interests of white people took precedence over the interests of black people. The state was not obliged to provide equal facilities to its subordinate races. Fourthly, the white racial group formed a single nation with Afrikaans and English-speaking elements but black people belonged to several (probably 10) different or potential nations – a method that made the white nation the largest in the country (Thompson 2008). Patriarchy is another discriminatory system of power in society in which men are dominant and women are largely excluded from any control or influence (Martin 1998). Patriarchy is exercised and reinforced by not only men but various institutions within society.

As a result of South Africa's racist and sexist political past that permeated even institutions of higher education, black women academics have continued to experience and report negative encounters within these spaces. This is because black women have intersectional identities because their gender and racial characteristics are linked to make their experience of oppression unique (Crenshaw 1994). For instance, black women academics have been said to

experience challenges in gaining promotion to the professorial[1] level as a result of the discrimination in higher education (Dlamini & Adams 2014). Various difficulties such as limited mentoring, lack of support network and high classroom load are also cited in the literature (Collins 2001; Divala 2014; Dlamini & Adams 2014; Mohope 2014; Ndlovu 2014; Zulu 2013). These challenges are most likely to impact the academic identities of black women academics. This is because, as Billot (2010) asserts, in the context of academia, the individual develops his sense of 'academic self' through their thoughts about what constitutes 'academic', their past experiences and their understanding of the present situation. The academic identity of an individual is important as it influences the way in which they see and define themselves and inform the decisions that they take and the way in which they behave in academic spaces. This means that the academic identity of an individual can influence their management of student learning, their delivery of courses (Winter 2009), their contribution to their discipline and maintenance of their academic autonomy, professionalism and collegial relations (normative values) (Winter 2009). As Walker (1998) notes, women are represented even more strongly in the lower ranks. Almost never found in professors or governing bodies (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2018; Subbaye & Vithal 2017). This article focuses on the academic identities of black women professors. Doing research that focuses on the identity of black women professors will be helpful in determining how they understand and experience the academic world, whilst shaping the types of opportunities and challenges they face so that higher education institutions can be better able to accommodate for them.

Billot (2010) further suggests that identity is continually changing and involves a subjective interpretation of our individuality in the context of activities. The changing of identities as a result of context can mean that the identity of black women within the academic space can change as a result of the environment in which they find themselves. Historically, South Africa comprised different higher education institutions which were separated based on race. Little research has been carried out to understand the academic identities of black women professors within this South African landscape. This article, therefore, focuses on the academic identities of black women professors based in two universities. Particularly, it seeks to explore: (1) how black women professors position themselves academically and (2) what influences their identities within South African higher education institutions.

1.According to Bitzer (2008), a professor holds a doctorate or relevant comparable qualification, provides evidence of integrating teaching with research and community interaction and leadership in terms of teaching and learning. A professor takes leadership in promoting the university as a research institution and maintains a research and publication record and has at least a C3 research rating at the NRF (Social Sciences). A professor takes leadership in community interaction programmes with high relevance to teaching and research programmes. A professor is also involved in national and international professional and disciplinary associations. She or he must be recognised, at least nationally, as a leader in her or his field of expertise. Lastly, a professor must be able to provide leadership in an academic department and participate constructively in faculty and institutional initiatives.

Academic identities

Conceptually, identity is a dynamic construct in which an individual's identity arises from personal, racial and national contexts, but it also builds socially over time (Billot 2010). Academic identity is a multifaceted and unstable notion (Hyde, Clarke & Drennan 2013:8), which is not easy to define (Madikizela-Madiya & Le Roux 2017). However, according to Winter (2009), academic identity can be defined as the extent to which an individual defines himself or herself primarily in terms of the organisation (and their position of managerial authority) or as a member of a profession. As suggested here, academic identity relates to what academics do, what they should do, what they can do and what they want to do (Madikizela-Madiya & Le Roux 2017). For example, identity as a social construct can mean, for an academic woman, that her identity can become fundamentally bound up with the values, beliefs and practices held in common with others of their institutions or departments (Billot 2010). Social construction can also mean that a black woman can simultaneously confront the splitting of identity between the powerful person (the academic) whom she might or might not recognise as herself and the powerless being who might lack confidence (the woman) (Walker 1998) as a result of the environment which they find themselves in.

Influencers of academic identities

Madikizela-Madiya and Le Roux (2017) indicate that both physical and metaphorical space matters in the construction of academic identity in higher education. Context plays a significant role in how the academic identities of black women are created in higher education institutions. Historically, South African higher education institutions comprised of white and black universities, with each having its own history and culture. Under apartheid, white universities were run by executives and councils, which gave strong support to the apartheid government (Bunting 2006). Consequently, white institutions were based on white people (and male) social power and privilege and displayed little sense of social accountability to the broader South African community (Mamdani 1998). Black universities, on the other hand, were instrumental in training young black people to be useful in the maintenance of the overall apartheid sociopolitical agenda (Bunting 2006). Twenty-seven years after the abolishment of apartheid, with numerous attempts at making positive changes in challenging the racist and patriarchal system, South African higher education institutions still struggle with the apartheid legacy. It is therefore important to investigate how black women professors have been academically affected by the current context of the South African higher education institutions.

For the development of their academic identities and to meet their academic expectations, academics need to reflect on whether they have a beneficial physical space (such as an office, a parking space, a library or other physical places) and

an enabling metaphorical space. Metaphorical space in this case refers to academics' agency – their freedom and power to choose what and how to do things that develop their academic identities, the opportunities for them to grow academically, time to think and reflect critically and time to be creative (Madikizela-Madiya 2014). In her study, which focused on space and academic identity construction, Madikizela-Madiya (2014) observed that academics often complain of limited space and time to develop their identities because of increasing workloads and expectations. She continues to assert that each academician needs to reflect on their position in relation to space in their institution and think of possible ways of acting in that particular situation, which may be positive for their academic identity construction.

Academic identity is also influenced by the corporate identity that is adopted by some of the higher education institutions and departments, which the academicians find themselves in (Melewar, Karaosmanoglu & Paterson 2005). Specifically, requirements such as developing programmes that attract as many students as possible and research, teaching and related practices being performed in a way that secures funding for the university and attracting grants from government and the industrial sector (Madikizela-Madiya 2014) can also influence the academic identity of black women academics. Furthermore, being active in community engagement projects and producing more researchers through postgraduate supervision (Billot 2010) can also inform the academic identities of black women professors. As lecturers, academics often emphasise their professional identities given their specialised teaching roles and discipline expertise. Hence, normative values such as the 'importance (and joys) of teaching and learning' (Brown & Humphreys 2006:240) and knowledge for its own sake (Nixon 1996) are stressed and more distinctive values for example 'creating knowledge, educating youth and contributing to their discipline professions' (Churchman 2006:9). For more senior academics, Winter (2009) presents an important argument stipulating that because professors are 'responsible for managing budgets largely dictated by senior management' (Lafferty & Fleming 2000:260), it is therefore expected that they might align themselves with the corporate enterprise and emphasise their managerial identities (Winter 2009).

Other factors outside of the academic space (such as family, friends, etc.) may also influence the academic identity of black women professors. Yosso (2005:79) talks about social capital, which she conceptualised as 'networks of people and community resources' that provide both instrumental and emotional support to move through society's institutions. Black women academics can survive and even thrive using social capital if they have the right skills and cultural techniques in higher education institutions, which can also inform their academic identities. For example, using social contacts and community resources to locate and get a research opportunity and funding can help black women professors.

Academic positionings of black women professors

South Africa has made progress in the number of black women who have become academics (Subbaye & Vithal 2017) through the establishment of initiatives (such as developing policies, research grants, mentoring projects and more positions for black women academics) to ensure that black women can be actively involved in higher education as academics (Maodzwa-Taruvinga & Divala 2014; Mzangwa 2018). Nevertheless, many black women academics still lament on the oppressive treatment that they come across in higher education institutions as a result of racism and sexism. Abbamonte (2018) states that:

> [*I*]ntersectionality is a concept often used in critical theories to describe the ways in which oppressive institutions (such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, and classism) are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another. (p. 108)

The term 'intersectionality' itself was introduced by Crenshaw (1989), when she discussed issues of black women's employment in the United States (Yuval-Davis 2006). Naturally, acknowledging one's race and gender is a form of identity for anybody; yet, what distinguishes black women's experiences of oppression from those of other groups is the fact that their gender and racial identities merge to make their experience of oppression unique (Crenshaw 1994). As a result, black women are more likely to encounter significant barriers to full involvement and contribution in the workplace, especially in higher education (Jones, Hwang & Bustamante 2015; Mokhele 2013; Zulu 2013).

Literature indicates that black women academics encounter discrimination such as lack of supportive networks, including mentoring (Collins 2001; Divala 2014; Mohope 2014; Ndlovu 2014; Zulu 2013). The discrimination that black women academics experience is most likely to influence them to feel and take on a victim of disempowerment academic identity. This victim of disempowerment academic identity can manifest itself in individuals having lowered beliefs about their own competency and a reduced sense of belonging, which can play a role in their performance and adaptation in the academic space (Ponjuan, Conley & Trower, 2011). Isolation may be the result of poor institutional fit, cross-cultural and social disparities and a lack of support (Mahabeer, Nzimande & Shoba 2018; Williams 2001) resulting in victim of disempowerment academic identity. In addition, some of the obstacles that black women face include having their intellect, credentials and power continuously questioned, being excluded from critical activities and having white people judge them based on negative stereotypes (Bhana & Pillay 2012; Subbaye & Vithal 2017), which can lead them to take on a victim of disempowerment academic identity. This may discourage some black women in higher education institutions and eventually abandoning it. For those who continue participating in higher education

institutions, the vast majority of them are not promoted to higher positions (Subbaye & Vithal 2017).

Whilst some black women academics position themselves as victims, rejected and discriminated against in their departments, there are those black women who have been able to triumph and succeed over the historical, systemic and cultural barriers (Jones et al. 2015; eds. Khunou et al. 2019) and take on resilient academic identities (Mullings, Gooden & Spencer 2020). Despite real and perceived obstacles, these scholars maintain their ambitions and plans for the future. Those who allow themselves to imagine possibilities beyond their present circumstances, frequently without the tools to achieve their aspirations, demonstrate this resiliency (Yosso 2005). As a result of taking on a resilient identity, some black women academicians have been able to achieve professorship (Griffin 2016). Black women academicians who have overcome their challenges through resiliency are more likely to participate as equal and full partners in the academic space, produce outputs and attain promotions (which can lead up to professorship) (Griffin 2016). For black women, taking on a resilient academic identity can also manifest itself through taking a stance and vocalising and demonstrating the type of support for faculty diversity and success that others can emulate (Jones et al. 2015).

Literature on the academic identities of South African black women in higher education institutions does not focus on professors much. Therefore, the research questions for this study are: (1) how do black women professors position themselves academically; and (2) what influenced the academic identities of black women professors within South African higher education institutions? Finding out how black women professors talk about their identity is useful to understand how their reality is constructed. Understanding the identities of black women professors can then help understand how black women academics can acquire agency to get promoted and how to design programmes to overcome these challenges.

Empowerment as a framework for academic identity

This study intended on expanding the discourse on black women's academic identity.

Empowerment has its roots in community psychology theory-based movements for fairness, equity and justice (Gonzalez 1991; Rappaport 1981). The concept of empowerment is useful in understanding how black women professors succeed in a challenging academic environment. Social activism, resistance to oppression and liberation struggles are the foundations of empowerment (Christens, Win & Duke 2015). Although empowerment theorists and researchers argue that empowerment is contextually determined and changes over time (Foster-Fishman et al. 1998) for this article empowerment is:

[A] group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalised or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environments, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced societal marginalization. (Maton 2008:5)

According to the definitions of empowerment, black women academics who go on to become professors may have been empowered by going through a developmental process that allowed them to obtain control over crucial life events and results.

Firstly, the perception and feeling that a person's association and active involvement can influence social and civic decision-making is discussed in the emotional component of psychological empowerment (Christens et al. 2015). Secondly, the cognitive component of psychological empowerment entails an understanding of the elements that influence policies and structures, as well as a critical and strategic understanding of how to change them. Commitment to common interests, leadership and decision-making skills and awareness and understanding of various options for social and civic activity are amongst the cognitive component's characteristics (Zimmerman 1995). The relational aspect of psychological empowerment emphasises the importance of connections and 'relational capacities' in psychological empowerment (Christens et al. 2015:19). Finally, the behavioural aspect of psychological empowerment describes the actions used to achieve authority and control in civic and community settings. As a result, it is a development of the concept of citizen engagement (Christens et al. 2015). This sort of empowerment might be used for black women academics because they may have exerted influence and acquired authority in higher education political communities such as student and employee bodies and were able to have a positive impact through their critical consciousness.

According to the empowerment concept, black women academics will be able to resist racial and sexism prejudice in higher education if they gain more control over their lives and surroundings, acquire valuable money and basic rights and achieve significant life goals.

Research design and methodology

This study, which is embedded in a larger study on a qualitative study design, was utilised to collect and analyse data on the discourses of black women academics in South African universities. Because it is naturalistic (not controlled), observational and in-depth ('thick'), the qualitative research design was suited because literature suggests that it deals with the intricacies of meanings in a social environment (Babbie & Mouton 2001:270; Trappes-Lomax 2004). The qualitative research design was appropriate for this study as it allowed for the identification and complete comprehension of the data-driven creations. As a result of the qualitative design, the researcher gained a thorough grasp of black female academics,

with a special focus on their academic accomplishments. The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm. This was because interpretivism believes that the mind interprets experiences and events and constructs meanings from them (Vosloo 2014). An interpretive approach was appropriate as it was directed at the meaning and understanding of the complexity of a social phenomenon (Vosloo 2014).

Study population

This study included black women professors from two public universities, one of which was historically white and the other of which had recently amalgamated. These two institutions were chosen because they are amongst South Africa's top research-producing universities, whilst simultaneously making remarkable attempts to be more racially fair than their peers. The decision to select participants from these colleges was made to allow formerly disadvantaged individuals' academic identities (in these places) to emerge, allowing participants to reflect on and evaluate where black women were in the process of transformation in higher education and professorship. Nine black women professors participated in the larger study. Five case studies of the nine black women professors were developed for this article:

> The case study method 'explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information… and reports a case description and case themes'. (Creswell 2013:97)

These five case studies were used because these case studies provide predominantly rich accounts of academic identity constructions. A multiple case study design was appropriate for this study as it provided a deep understanding of a specific phenomenon – in this instance, the academic identities of black women professors (Zach 2006). Multiple case studies also offer the similarities and differences between the cases (Baxter & Jack 2008). A multiple case study also enables the researcher to analyse the data both within each situation and across situations (Yin 2003).

Case descriptions

Gabi was an associate professor in the College of Humanities, and she had 12 years of experience as an academic staff member at the time of the study. Gabi reported putting in a lot of hard work and hours in order to become a professor. She indicated that teaching and preparing for teaching, reading and writing all needed focused, uninterrupted time. Through her focus, she was able to get a promotion from a lecturer to a senior lecturer and thereafter to an associate professor. As she heads her department, Gabi reported that she does have an agenda of grooming postgraduate students that show potential. She encourages and shares opportunities such as bursaries and involves them in research project work. These students have been successful and some have even become staff members in the university.

Nozizwe was also an associate professor in the College of Humanities, with 10 years of experience as an academic staff member at the time of the study. When talking about professorship, Nozizwe described the pride she had on becoming a black professor. She reported that there was much knowledge to be produced and that it was 'unlimited as the world [*was*] constantly changing'. Nozizwe indicated her excitement about brought a unique perspective to the phenomenon being studied, as a result of her background as a black woman. She acknowledged that she was able to bring a kind of intersection between, class, race, gender and positionality into her work as a black woman.

Mbalenhle was an associate professor in the College of Health Sciences, with 25 years of experience in a university as an academic staff member. Despite dealing with a lot of racism in her school, Mbalenhle continued to work hard and excelled in her professorship by constantly being cognisant of her supportive mother and husband. What also helped her was passionately pursuing initiatives without any expectations and focusing on what she could control.

Thandeka was a full professor in the College of Health Sciences, and she had 22 years of experience as an academic staff member at the time of the study. She asserted that:

> 'Wherever you put me, I respect work. I don't have that victim mentality. I am not someone who just complains. I work very hard but I also believe God had a hand in this because somehow I happened to be at the right place at the right time.' (Thandeka, Associate professor, Health Sciences)

Abigail was a full professor in law and management studies and had been an academic staff member for 22 years. Although she had experienced numerous challenges, Abigail enjoyed being with her students. She believed that she had the responsibility to be there for them and to be their inner voice.

Data collection procedure

After ethical clearance was obtained for the study, participants were recruited through emails. Interested participants then e-mailed the researcher back and then purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit other participants. The purposive sampling method was appropriate as it allows the researcher to focus on the particular characteristics of the participants who are of interest, which best enable the researcher to answer the research questions (Durrheim 2006; Merriam 2009; Patton 1990). Through contacts and referrals, the snowball sampling technique allows for the steady building of a sufficient sample (Ary et al. 2014). This strategy was appropriate because it provided individuals with the qualities needed to answer the study questions. It also aided in reaching members who would have been impossible to approach otherwise. The participants consented to participate in the study after the researcher explained the information sheet and informed consent form to them, which they signed. The

interviews took place at the participants' office spaces and were 45 min – 90 min long.

As the study was conducted under an interpretive paradigm, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with black women professors were the most appropriate method for gathering data. By asking the participants to expand on their comments whilst maintaining some structure in the interviews, this form of interviewing allowed for contemplation and in-depth conversations (Alshenqeeti 2014). An interview schedule, which also consisted of follow-up questions, helped to understand black women professors on a deeper level (e.g. what was your experience of being a black woman in your field of work? Any perks (bonuses, benefits), challenges, surprises and support in the workplace?). A semi-structured interview schedule had a prepared set of questions, which were only used as a guide and not necessarily verbatim or in order (Silverman 2013). The researcher was able to follow the participants' directions in the interview whilst probing for their responses within the parameters of the issue of interest thanks to the semi-structured interview schedule (Fontana & Frey 2000).

As there were no participants from the disciplines of commerce, law or management studies in this article, the extent of the participants' academic identities was limited. It's probable that black female professors from these fields may have shed more light on the occurrence. The second constraint was that whilst there were black women academics in higher education and much has been written about them, there was little literature on black women who had advanced to professorship. Another drawback of this study was the absence of literature on black women academics, as there was little literature to compare and contrast the findings of this study with the South African context. Interviews were conducted in English and IsiZulu.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcriptions from the interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2019) six steps of thematic analysis were appropriate to use as they seek to describe data in rich detail by identifying, analysing and reporting emergent patterns in the data. The researcher familiarised herself with the interviews by reading the transcripts and listening to the audio-recorded data. The codes (features that appear interesting and meaningful) were generated thereafter. The common key codes were extracted from all five interviews. The overarching themes were identified from the common codes. The themes identified were then refined and defined. Finally, the researcher interpreted the extracts that related to each of the themes from the study (Braun & Clarke 2019). The emergent themes were used to structure the findings and discussion section of the article.

Credibility and trustworthiness

The congruency of the findings with the study design and procedures is referred to as credibility (Gray 2014; Shenton 2004). This improves the accuracy of the conclusions about the phenomenon in question. The researcher's conclusions and inferences must be backed by the data (Silverman 2013). The data must be interpreted in a believable, persuasive, rational, reasonable and convincing manner (Silverman 2013). The explanations for each of the methodological decisions made for this investigation have been discussed here to increase the validity of the study. An audio tape recorder was also used to mechanically record the data. The researcher's theoretical statements are backed up by evidence from the participants' accounts, which increases the trustworthiness of the research's findings. To improve the analysis' credibility, specific snippets are supplied. In qualitative research, extracts are used to increase validity because they force the researcher to document the claims for readers who weren't present during the talks to observe the interactions as they happened (Shenton 2004).

The ability of study's findings to be transferred to similar situations and individuals is referred to as transferability (Kelly 2006). This study demonstrated how its findings may be applied to different scenarios by providing a large amount of data that could help other potential users make transferability decisions (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The phenomena under investigation were described in depth, as were the cultural and social contexts in which the data were collected. The location of the interviews was explained in detail. The participants' backgrounds and the various academic environments are described in depth. The number of fieldwork participants, data collecting methods and the number and length of data collection sessions were all explained in the previous section of this article.

Ethical considerations

All women who participated in this study provided their informed consent. Details pertaining to the study and methods of data collection were clearly outlined in the invitation letter to the participants. To adhere to the ethics requirements, application for ethical clearance was granted by a large public university. An information sheet was given and explained to the participants. This information sheet provided ethical information about the participants' rights, such as their confidentiality, volunteering and that they could discontinue whenever they felt uncomfortable during the research process. Other ethics that guided this research were informed consent, ensuring that no harm was caused to the participants in the study and that the sampling, data collection and analysis processes were fair and equitable.

Findings and discussion

In relation to the first research objective, the study identified the academic identities of the five participants in South African higher education institutions. There were two themes that pertained to academic identities that emerged from the data with the five case studies. The first theme was encouraging scholarship and student learning and the

second theme was conducting research for transformation. In relation to the second research objective, the study showed what influenced their identities. The findings showed how the five case studies developed their passion (for the above mentioned) through both the encouraging and discouraging encounters they had with some of their teachers and lecturers, respectively. In discussing these findings, the article will draw on previous supporting literature and frameworks. All names used are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

How black women professors position themselves academically: The academic identities of black women professors

Theme 1: Encouraging scholarship and student learning

The passion for teaching and scholarship that four case studies involved in this study had seemed to indicate them making a commitment to nurture the talents of younger academics in their departments. The four participants cultivated student learning and academia by setting out a supportive environment (with opportunities and prospects) that made it possible for younger (especially black) academics to triumph in these institutions. The four case studies were demonstrating that they used their status and influence as senior academic members in their universities to empower younger academics.

When talking about her passion for her teaching and learning, Gabi stated:

'I love my work, I love teaching, it's my passion. I've had the ability to attract a lot of Black postgraduate students. I'm not sure if I still look younger so they find me accessible, and also because I speak mostly African languages and so they find that also accessible. I encourage them and I share opportunities with them, and they get these opportunities.' (Gabi, Associate professor, Humanities)

Similarly, Mbalenhle mentioned:

'If I see a student that is really committing themselves so much, I would give them a book that I wrote. I like to nurture leadership, good people, positive people. You know I want that gene to carry on, it must spread so I would do anything to encourage that.' (Mbalenhle, Associate professor, Health Sciences)

The findings showing encouraging scholarship and student learning are aligned with Winter (2009) who reported that the academic identity of an academic influences their management of student learning, their delivery of courses, their contribution to their discipline and collegial relations. From the quotes above, it is evident that Gabi and Mbalenhle identify and position themselves as nurturers of scholarship and student learning. As lecturers, academics often emphasise their professional identities, given their specialised teaching roles and discipline expertise (Winter 2009). Hence, normative values, such as the 'importance (and joys) of teaching and learning' (Brown & Humphreys 2006:240) are stressed and more distinctive values, such as 'creating knowledge, educating youth and contributing to

their discipline professions' (Churchman 2006:9). The participants were eager to nurture and encourage younger academics, especially those who were black. Gabi and Mbalenhle deemed guiding their junior academics as an important task and duty in their role as academic leaders and professors who were deemed accessible to some students in terms of age and language.

When talking about her relationship with her post-graduate students, Abigail asserted:

'I enjoyed being with my students, and I always thought that I owed them that … Because I could see how during, for example proposal presentations or any other decision being made about their assessment, I could see the kind of thinking when it came to that, the kind of [*Black discrimination*]. So, I thought that I have that responsibility; to be there and be their inner voice and be the voice of reason so that nobody goes through what I'm going through.' (Abigail, Full professor, Law and Management Studies)

Whilst discussing her plans as a professor and dean of her department, Thandeka mentioned:

'I've given myself a target of five women who will become full professors, and the way I'm planning to do that is to create opportunities for them, give them chances to go and spend overseas in different institutions, fund that, give them sabbatical leave, give them visiting scholarships, be supportive.' (Thandeka, Full professor, Health Sciences)

As Winter (2009) asserts, academic identity can be defined as the extent to which an individual defines themselves primarily in terms of their position of managerial authority or as a member of a profession. Abigail and Thandeka, through the quotes here show themselves as embracing the identity of developing and nurturing scholarship. This is particularly important as (black) women academics have been said to experience difficulties in gaining promotion to the professorial level as a result of the discrimination in higher education. In the given quote, Thandeka (as a professor) indicated the goal she had of promoting women to professorship and the strategic ways in which she would achieve this (which was by affording them prospects for academic development).

These findings show that four of the case studies supported their junior colleagues by demonstrating their commitment to gender (and racial) changes and diversity in the academic scene by being proactive, outspoken and courageous. These findings back up Peterson's (2014) claim that women academic leaders believe they have a specific responsibility to make a difference consciously, both as managers and as women and hence wish to start improvements by accommodating those (women) who will come after them.

Gabi, Mbalenhle, Abigail and Thandeka depicted themselves as enablers in privileged leadership positions in higher education institutions who were exploiting their authority to support and help promote their students and previously marginalised junior colleagues. This was in line with

Christens et al.'s (2015) definition of empowerment which asserts that it has its roots in social activity, resistance to oppression and liberation attempts. Furthermore, the emotional component of psychological empowerment examines how a person's affiliation and active participation might influence social and civic decision-making (Christens et al. 2015). This could mean that the four case studies, as cultivating leaders who assisted some other academics in locating and obtaining university scholarships, promotions and other international possibilities, assisted to influence their future promotions.

Theme 2: Conducting research for (social) transformation

Thandeka and Nozizwe also talked about their desire to make impactful contributions within their fields, and therefore initiated research that contributed to some (social) transformation endeavours. Thandeka focused on research that yielded direct social transformative impacts within specific communities and Nozizwe was more attentive to producing and disseminating knowledge that was transformative.

When giving an example of her research endeavours, Thandeka said:

'We had done a study there and we saw that there was health illiteracy among the drivers. They were not aware of certain things and they believed a lot in traditional things and we recommended out of that that we needed to do a follow up study and established that they needed some condoms etc. As a result of the work that we did, the minister established some clinics in [*these areas*]. That has been the impact of my work. I am a community worker; I do a lot of community work.' (Thandeka, Full professor, Health Sciences)

As Nozizwe was speaking on the importance of black women professors in research, she mentioned:

'Knowledge is unlimited, and the world is constantly changing. The exciting part of being a Black woman is the context that you are able to bring. I mean you are able to bring that kind of intersection between class, race, gender, positionalities, all these things in the knowledge you produce.' (Nozizwe, Associate professor, Humanities)

Supported by the given quotes and by virtue of their presence in higher education institutions, black women academics provide diversity and transformation to the research management environment (Peterson 2014).

In her example, Thandeka shows how she aims in her research to reach, educate and inform parts of society who are illiterate about important health issues. She identifies herself as a 'community worker', signifying that she is passionate about promoting welfare in her area of expertise. The promotion of welfare ultimately brings about transformation within the people she serves (such as taxi drivers) in terms of the way in which they think about and live particular subjects. This example and self-identification presents the participants as those occupying the 'conducting

research for (social) transformation' academic identity. Nozizwe, on the other hand, acknowledged that for her, the production of knowledge influenced by intersectionality (such as being black and a woman) is powerful. Because of the way their gender and racial identities overlap to make their experience of oppression distinct from that of other groups, black women have intersectional identities (Crenshaw 1994). Producing knowledge from this kind of positionality brings about transformation within disciplines especially those deeply entrenched in non-African and patriarchal foundations.

Black women professors can be change agents in higher education and beyond (because of their unique background), and they can also better position themselves to challenge the racial and patriarchal system and normalised Eurocentric and masculine views. The findings show how the participants portray themselves as holding an identity of transforming society through research.

What influences black women professors' identities within South African higher education institutions: Influencers of academic identities

Thandeka and Mbalenhle talked at length about the support systems (and lack thereof) that influenced them and shaped the academic positions that they eventually saw themselves taking in higher education institutions. The following case studies showed how they were able to cultivate a passion for teaching, scholarship and (social) transformation. They developed their passion through the encouraging and discouraging encounters they had with some of their high school teachers and university lecturers, respectively.

Theme 1: Encouraging encounters

As a result of experiencing empowerment happenstances with some of their teachers and lecturers, Thandeka was influenced to also adopt an empowering approach to her own juniors. When talking about the key role players in her successful educational and career trajectory, Thandeka mentioned:

'He [*my teacher who was also the principal*] made me join a debate team, Ha! Ha! … He unearthed that talent in me while I was reluctant to face people and stand at podiums, but he made me lead it … He cared about the education of a Black child … gave up on being a lecturer to be a high school teacher … He felt the African child needed role models … to be nurtured …. That instilled a sense of selflessness, it made a big impression on me … We were disadvantaged differently … so that is one of the things I have pushed as well; transformation. I've appointed a number of developmental lecturers and I supported them.' (Thandeka, Full professor, Health Sciences)

In her given quote, Thandeka presents her high school teacher as someone who made and left a lasting impression on her because of his sacrifice of giving up prestigious opportunities (of being a university lecturer) for a more modest position to influence African learners positively. During the apartheid dispensation, black people were

subjected to inferior education through the law of Bantu Education that had disturbing implications that marginalised black people from pursuing quality higher education. Taking the South African historical background into consideration, Thandeka is portraying her teacher as empowered and empowering, as he was educated and wanted other black people to be educated. He was in charge of his life and chose to devote his time, energy and knowledge on younger black high school students because he desired the same for them. Thandeka acknowledges and thanks the teacher for his efforts, as she was a benefactor. In her teaching profession, the teacher is being positioned as a strong agent. Inspired by her teacher Thandeka, later on in her career as a professor, has also developed a passion for giving back and supporting previously disadvantaged academics to advance in their careers. She does this in conjunction with supporting the overall call for transformation within the South African landscape.

The findings from the Thandeka case study are congruent with Yosso (2005), who suggested that social relationships can help people navigate through institutions in both a practical and emotional way. Academic relationships, according to Croom and Patton (2012), provided junior academics with crucial advice on teaching, service and research. This highlights the significance of a mentoring connection between senior and junior academics, particularly for black women. Observing and interacting with older academics on a regular basis also influenced the nurturing style they adopted as professors. This is consistent with Yosso's (2005) assertion that black communities pass the information and resources gained through institutions on to their social networks; in this case, it was through encouraging, cultivating and promoting others, particularly previously disadvantaged groups within the university space.

Theme 2: Discouraging encounters

On the contrary, some of the participants did experience discrimination from their lecturers and seniors, but as a result were inspired to be supportive of others, especially their juniors. Whilst discussing her experience in her department, Mbalenhle stated:

> 'It was difficult. For my PhD I had to look for mentors outside of South Africa; no one wanted to support me. So, in my position now I have even asked for the top 20 students from each year, You know why I want to nurture them, I want to groom them so that they can be like me one day. I want to identify them from first year and grow with them.' (Mbalenhle, Associate professor, Health Sciences)

As a result of not receiving mentorship from her seniors within her institution, Mbalenhle started developing a passion for mentoring younger academics as she was made aware of the difficulties of not having the appropriate supportive networks within the same institution. She uses the discourse of mentoring to show her passion for teaching, scholarship and social transformation within her department. This participant was also showing that she possessed

components of critical consciousness, as she was able to question social arrangements and structures that marginalised her (and other members of her race) whilst committing to preventing these injustices from happening in her presence by taking critical action (Christens et al. 2015).

This example of not being supported academically was echoed by other participants as well. As a result of not being mentored as black academics whilst their white counterparts were, many black women professors felt compelled to make a difference in their academic settings, thus they took up the responsibility of mentoring, guiding, nurturing and grooming younger academics (especially, those from the black race). The participants demonstrated awareness of the oppression that being a black woman might bring in terms of support and exclusion in the academic sphere. Oppression is defined as a system that maintains an unequal distribution of basic resources, lowering the quality of life for marginalised people (Christens et al. 2015). Firstly, the participants described themselves as deliberate and aggressive in providing opportunities for more black academics and guaranteeing that they may flourish and thrive in higher education institutions. According to Christens et al. (2015), critical consciousness makes it apparent that the activities it encompasses are those geared towards changing unjust systems and practices (Christens et al. 2015). They were defending themselves by claiming to be powerful. Secondly, because the participants demonstrated that they had influence over events and outcomes that were important to students and junior colleagues, the findings can be connected to empowerment theory. Most black female professors, for example, portrayed themselves as committed to assisting younger academics in setting and achieving goals, and dedicated time in their education, coaching and training.

Discussion

The theme of encouraging scholarship and student learning stresses the importance of academics that encourage learning of students and are supportive nurturers that show care for their students. Such academics show the ability to empower others. Lord and Hutchison (1993) argue that supports are vital in expanding empowerment. The academic encouragement of students whom the participants showed is in line with the concept of empowerment, which focuses on identifying capabilities instead of sorting risk factors and exploring environmental influences of social problems instead of blaming victims (Perkins & Zimmerman 1995). Lord and Hutchison (1993) argue that sometimes support from people is the catalyst that enables individuals to begin the journey towards more personal control.

Perhaps further research on students feeling encouraged and supported by their lecturers is needed to investigate the scale in which academics make students feel supported at the scholarship level. This is especially because a lot of attention

is paid to the financial aid of students but attention must also be given to academic support in terms of student learning for their academic success.

To a certain degree, the findings of the encouragement of student learning are also not surprising as education within black communities is highly valued by those who value it. This is especially as a result of oppression (resulting in poor education and low socio-economic standing) that black people underwent during the apartheid and education being perceived as the only gateway to true freedom (Gardiner 2008; Puttick 2012).

Conducting research that enables transformation is another way in which the participants were empowering individuals and institutions. Empowerment is a structure that links strengths and abilities, natural support systems, and positive behaviour with sociopolitical and social change (Rappaport 1981, 1984). It is further asserted that empowerment-oriented interventions improve well-being, with the goal of mitigating problems, providing individuals with the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills and engaging professionals as collaborators rather than authoritative professionals (Perkins & Zimmerman 1995). Having the initiative to conduct research for transformation suggests that social justice is a prime concern for some black academicians. One of empowerment evaluation's principles include social justice – a fair, equitable allocation of resources, opportunities, obligations and bargaining power (Wandersman et al. 2005). Transformation also concerns itself with inclusivity and therefore academics should be mandated to explore issues that bring about justice and transformation, especially within the South African landscape.

There are basic social inequities in society and empowerment can help to improve these conditions by helping people to improve so that social conditions and communities are positively impacted in the process (Wandersman et al. 2005).

The case studies were empowered and as a result were able to empower others. None of the case studies became empowered on their own. Rather, social context and community life were critical to understanding the changes that the participants experienced over time. Using both the encouraging and discouraging encounters to empower themselves suggest that the participants were determined to succeed and want to encourage the same for others. Lord and Hutchison (1993) argue that having confidence in the person; providing the right information at the right time; showing initiative so that the person could envisage new possibilities for themselves and finally, challenging the person to change and participate are all important in mentoring and self-encouragement of an individual for empowerment.

The study has implications for policy and practice. Firstly, the academic identities of the black women professors in this study seem to be characterised by their nurturing and transformative academic leadership. This study challenges the stereotype that all women in leadership positions are masculine and lead like men. Women leaders should be encouraged to lead in whatever way that is most comfortable to them without judgement. This is likely to lead them to better perform their job.

Instituting through policy that academics (from different backgrounds) be more involved and active in nurturing (and not just lecturing) the scholarship of students and younger academics will be beneficial for the transformation of institutions of higher education. An implication for policy is for all (not just black women) academics to be mandated to play an active role in the transformation of higher education (and to provide evidence of such). This can take the form of conducting research for transformation in higher education institutions, which can assist in the understanding of the importance of diversity and inclusivity in these spaces.

The researcher acknowledges that the topic of academic identity amongst black women professors needs further exploration as there is more to it than what the article has presented. Research with a larger study population could assist in unveiling more academic identities amongst black women professors (and professors in general).

Conclusion

The study focused on the academic identities of five black women professors from two South African universities. When exploring how they position themselves academically, the theme of *encouragement of scholarship* and *student learning*, along with the theme of *conducting research for (social) transformation* came out strongly in the interviews. When investigating the influencers of their identities, the black women professors talked about how experiencing both *encouraging* and *discouraging encounters* with their seniors inspired them to be supportive of their juniors. These findings highlighted how the identities of the five black women professors are marked by empowerment as they demonstrated behaviour that both critiques oppression and shows a desire for equity, harmony and social justice.

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Author's contributions

N.T.Z. is the sole author of this article.

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