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A black woman's perspective on understanding transformation and diversity in South African higher education

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Background: Today, transformation and diversity are concepts that form an integral part of the functioning of higher education institutions globally. These two concepts have drawn vast amounts of interest from scholars who work in the field of higher education studies.

Aim: The current article considers the perspectives of black women academics in an exploration of the concepts of transformation and diversity. This standpoint approach brings to the fore the voices of black women in the changing higher education landscape, in an attempt to provide an understanding of prevailing gender inequalities.

Setting: The study was conducted at one higher education institution, involving women academics from different faculties and different social backgrounds.

Methods: The adoption of a gender approach sheds light on a social justice perspective that higher education institutions in South Africa aspire to attain. The article reports on 12 black women's configuration of transformation and diversity from a gender perspective in a country where gender in higher education has always been an issue of contention.

Results: The inclusion of four white women academics in the study served the goal of contrasting their views with those of the black women, to illuminate the intersectionality of race and gender in human experiences. A thematic analysis of data highlights the complexities of understanding the role of institutional management, self-responsibility and self-awareness in transformation and diversification processes. The role of different standpoints in understanding transformation also came out strongly in the findings.

Conclusion: It can, therefore, be concluded that standpoints play a crucial role in meaning making and experiences of transformation for women academics in institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: diversity; transformation; standpoint theory; women academics; higher education.

Background

This article applies a standpoint perspective to investigate the way transformation and diversity in South African higher education relate to black women. It also sheds light on the importance of understanding and appreciating transformation and diversity in higher education in South Africa. The argument presented is that, while higher education institutions in South Africa strive to transform socially, the voices of black women academics need to be taken into account if institutions are to make progress. This claim is made against a background where, through the years, black women involved in higher education have been facing many forms of marginalisation (HESA 2014). Attempts to marginalise black women have ranged from cultural oppression within familial and societal traditions of masculinity and femininity (Mans & Lauwrens 2013) to marginalisation imposed historically by legislative rules (South Africa 1953). The consequence of marginalisation has been that women academics could not fully benefit from transformation agendas of institutions (Badat 2010). This means that any attempts at transformation need to redress these imbalances of the past, by understanding the needs and experiences of this most marginalised group, that is, black women academics.

By adopting a standpoint approach, the article presents the argument that gender multivocality in transformative discourses do not serve the redressal agenda. While the argument could be that all women have faced marginalisation, in one way or another, and have to be considered in transformation plans, in the South African context, this simple argument overlooks the gross

disparities that used to exist among race and gender groups. For example, while an Afrikaner woman was also marginalised, her woes ended within the walls of a cultural group. She could still enrol at a university, although she would have limited, gender-based choices, because of the home-carer role that limited her freedom of choice. Hers was not a war against a system that limited any freedom of choice and humanity. Her experiences cannot be compared to those of a black woman. Therefore, it is important that the social justice agendas, which put emphasis on equity and equality in higher education institutions in this country, place black woman academics at the forefront of transformation processes, in order to heed state-led mandates in South Africa.

To understand the arguments in this article, the next section provides a brief explanation of the processes of transformation and diversity as understood from the perspectives of institutions and the state in South Africa. The discussion continues to the history of black women in the labour force and specifically in higher education spaces. The intention of this discussion is to highlight the importance of a mindshift in understanding gender transformation and the need to prioritise black women in transformation attempts by institutions. The empirical study described in the sections that follow presents the methodology adopted for this study and its results, in the form of the perspectives of women academics themselves on transformation and diversity.

Transformation and diversity in higher education

Transformation and diversity cannot be divorced from each other when considering change processes and practices in institutions of higher learning. The interdependence of these two concepts is a result of the social, economic and political history of South Africa as a country in general and higher education in particular. The racial, gender and class divisions that characterised apartheid South Africa presented insurmountable challenges to the higher education context (Breetzke & Hedding 2017; Bunting 2006). Even though South Africa has managed to conquer its turbulent past, remnants of that past have persisted into the current dispensation and need to be addressed. The persisting challenges, especially those of gender and race, have forced institutions in this country to institute processes and plans in an endeavour to heed the transformation agenda impressed by the state (CHE 1997).

The focus of this article on black women, diversity and transformation emanates from the realisation that, while all higher education institutions in South Africa are working hard to transform, black women still face numerous challenges pertaining to upward mobility, research success and overcoming gender-based epistemological stereotypes (Joubert & Guenther 2017; Ramohai 2016). While state-led mandates emphasise the need to redress past ills that affected this most marginalised group, institutions still do not have gender equity policies that intentionally talk to black women

in transformation plans (Zwane et al. 2015). Failure to develop intentional plans that address the capacity needs of black women academics could hamper transformation plans and reduce institutions' attempts to avoid political correctness that only focuses on head count (DHET 2013; HESA 2014). The consequence of this massification perspective to transformation is that it paints a deceiving picture of gender transformation. Insider perspectives usually indicate that black women often become outsiders from within and do not successfully participate in their institutions (Lloyd-Jones 2009). Naicker (2012) points out that institutions are characterised by centres of power that continue to suppress women academics and make them invisible and voiceless.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that transformation in higher education is a complex process that differs from context to context (Badat 2010; CHE 2015; DHET 2009, *Transformation* cannot be understood as a blanket term that applies to one institution as it would to the next. Each institution has its own academic and social dynamics and challenges that require a contextualised approach to change. The individualism of institutional dynamics is not reflected only across different countries but is seen even within the same country, across institutions (CHE 2015).

For example, in terms of country differences, while most higher education institutions in Britain confront challenges pertaining to gender inequalities and have to transform in this regard (David 2015; Morley 2005), South African higher education institutions mostly battle with race and then gender, disability and class (Badat 2010). On the other hand, within South African higher education institutions themselves, previously white Afrikaans institutions face challenges relating to racial inequalities – to a much larger extent than previously black institutions. This complexity makes it difficult to have a uniform definition of the process of transformation across global higher education institutions. Although it is difficult to define transformation, Breetzke and Hedding (2017:146) believe that, in the South African context, it is important to consider transformation in terms of the 'undoing of the historical injustices that the majority of the black African population suffered in terms of access, availability and representation in the higher education sector of the country'. Although the redress could include black men, gender complexities still make black women a priority in transforming higher education institutions.

Owing to the complex nature of defining the term *transformation* as a process in higher education institutions, it is difficult to gauge progress unless areas of transformation within institutions are clearly spelled out in institutional plans and initiatives. If an institution strives to transform its gender balance, for example, there should be clear, documented plans on how this will be achieved and monitored. It is not enough to talk about broader diversification without developing targeted and intentional plans for the focused groups (CHEC 2014). Therefore, the South African government clearly communicates its mandate

to institutions, informing them that they should consider and prioritise black women academics when they transform and diversify their staff (DHET 2016).

While the preceding argument advocates that gender should take centre stage in transformation, Haring-Smith (2012) believes that diversity is sometimes erroneously regarded as being confined to race, class and gender. As a result, some transformation plans confine themselves to these visible aspects, overlooking other important indicators, such as socio-economic, ideological and political diversity, which also need to be considered in the transformation process. Turner, Gonzalez and Wong (2011) raise the important point that women are not a homogenous group but inhabit multiple identities that make each one's social reality different. Thus, even if they have gender-focused transformation and diversity plans, institutions need to bear in mind that women are not a homogenous group bound by their gender similarity. Various aspects of their backgrounds and experiences give them different standpoints that require thorough consideration in the compilation of transformation plans. On this point, Sang (2018) argues that, while certain aspects of womanhood might lead to some common experiences for women (in the case of this article, women academics), there are identity variables that intersect to create unique experiences for different groups of people (Lawrence 2018). The variables include class, race and geographical backgrounds that form locations and positionalities that define people. When people make sense of their social environments, they use these locations as interpretation lenses that help them to create meanings for themselves. For example, black women from urban areas and advantaged schooling backgrounds have a much greater opportunity to obtain employment in higher education; women from rural areas and disadvantaged schooling backgrounds may find themselves marginalised by socio-economic systems when they search for employment. This analysis re-emphasises the complexity of transformation in higher education.

With reference to the importance of considering transformation and diversity from multiple angles, Vermeulen (2011) urges institutions to consider two forms of diversity: constituential and value-climate diversity. Constituential diversity refers to a visible mix of indicators, such as race, gender and class, while value and climate diversity depicts the social environment and culture of different constituencies. The latter form of diversity, which Haring-Smith (2012:9) refers to as 'invisible diversity', is more complex and difficult to address. In relation to black women, once more, the backgrounds that form part of the standpoints and dispositions they use to adapt to new environments render them vulnerable to hostile cultures and practices that perpetuate gender stereotypes. The stereotypes that communities use to construct gender roles (Mollaeva 2017) make it difficult for women to survive in male-oriented spaces that reinforce the constructed roles. Sadly, scholars have found that institutional cultures are still predominantly masculine (Kele & Pietersen 2015; Tsikata 2007) and, in terms of staff component, are still white. This claim casts the focus on the intention of institutions to transform and eradicate

gender-stereotype-affirming practices in diversity plans. Haring-Smith (2012) and Tienda (2013) argue that, if institutions are serious about transformation, they have to make it an inclusive practice that considers an inclusive excellence.

Black women in South African higher education

The history of black women worldwide and in South Africa specifically represents a sad reality. For decades, the black woman has been the face of poverty (SAHRC 2017), seen through the domestic-worker lenses (Hickson & Strous 1993; Marais & Van Wyk 2015). The subjugation of black women to the position of domestic workers confirmed constructions of women as home-carers and child-bearers (Mohutsioa-Makhudu 1989; Smith 1992), which, in apartheid South Africa, were accompanied by horrific stories of oppression and dehumanisation at the hands of white masters (Hickson & Strous 1993). History has not given the black woman the recognition she deserves, and she has not been considered as a worthwhile being who can contribute positively and cause positive change in the political and corporate world (Ueno 2010). It is for this reason that, when South Africa broke with the apartheid era, the government immediately placed its focus on how the role of the black woman could be deconstructed and reconstructed, to give it dignity (Maodzwa-Taruvinga & Divala 2014). Policies, acts and legislative documents were drawn up (Altbacht, Reisberg & Rumbley 2009) to ensure that black women could be actively involved in the knowledge economy and world of work (DOE 1996; Maodzwa-Taruvinga & Divala 2014; South Africa 1996). Higher education was one of the target areas for this redress.

The mandate for higher education has been to 'increase access to higher education for black women, as students and part of staff' (CHE 1997; HESA 2014). Employment challenges affect not only South African higher education, but other countries too (Turner, Gonzalez & Wong 2008). In South Africa, however, the state has been proactive in addressing employment-related challenges, especially those related to access and success. Institutions have been mandated to produce annual reports to indicate how they have responded to this mandate (Commission for Gender Equality 2017). As a result, black women's access to academic positions has driven employment practices in higher education. However, research indicates that black women in academia do not succeed as expected (Herman 2011) – with success in this regard being measured by the ability to conduct research, engage in quality teaching and learning, and involvement in engaged scholarship (DHET 2013; HESA 2014). This means that higher education transformation has to address the challenge of ensuring that black and women academics possess the intellectual and academic capabilities that enable them to engage successfully in these three areas.

A recent study by Joubert and Guenther (2017) brings to the fore one of the challenges facing black women as researchers

or scientists in South Africa. The study indicates that, of the 211 academics who are considered active scientists in the country, 78% are white, and only 17% are black women. This indicates that, in response to the low numbers reflected in this statistic, institutions need to capacitate black women academics. Doing so would ensure that black women academics participate in higher education as knowledge producers (Maodzwa-Taruvinga & Divala 2014). Alluding to the standpoints of black women academics, especially newcomers to the academy, Dominiguez-Whitehead and Moosa (2014) point out that the past apartheid era and its socio-political climate impacted negatively on the ability of these women to survive in academia. While institutions try to implement capacity-building programmes to assist these women, the author is of the opinion that not enough has been done to respond to the research capacity of black women academics.

Theoretical framework

To ground the transformation arguments, the article draws on a feminist standpoint theory. Different feminists (Brooks 2006; Harding 2004; Smith 1992; Woodman 2018; Wylie 2003) present individual approaches to standpoint theories; however, generally, these theories make three broad claims. These claims are that:

- knowledge is socially situated
- marginalised groups are socially situated in ways that make it possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions, compared to the non-marginalised
- research that is focused on power relations should begin with the lives of the marginalised, by listening to them and hearing their voices.

According to these claims, the *marginalised* and their *experiences* take centre stage in research that uses standpoint theories. Woodman (2018) emphasises the point that standpoints engage different social positions of individuals and assist individuals to create distinct perspectives that shape their experiences. Wylie (2003) believes that the experiences originate from the systematically structured roles and relations that shape the epistemologies of the marginalised. These experiences enable the marginalised to form a collective positioning and location and accumulated knowledge, from which they can interpret systems within their social environment.

This understanding of standpoint theory makes this theory relevant to this article. It is important to look at black women academics' experiences, positioning and locations within higher education and to use them as lenses to interpret the extent to which institutions are changing. Women's perceptions of transformation and diversity at their institution, derived from their positioning or standpoints as black women coming from marginalised backgrounds and entering academic spaces, serve as the basis for the discussions in this article. The article looks closely at how the black women involved use their experiences to evaluate their dispositions towards their transforming institution. The standpoint approach assists in situating the arguments in this article within a transformative understanding,

in which black women use their disposition to reflect on their own contributions to transformation at their institution. The aim of standpoint theory, as a theory of knowledge building and as a research method (Brooks 2006), is achieved when women strive to provide meaning, to change systems in their institution and to place themselves at the centre of the change process. Brooks (2006) echoes the role of standpoint research when she emphasises that the knowledge and understanding of women's experiences gained through standpoint research should be used to bring about social change or improvement. Improvement is attained when women share their experiences, critically examine their environments and develop, as epistemic agents, critical perspectives and consciousness that guide them to question and understand issues in their environment (Brooks 2006).

Design and methods

The study employed a case study design that focused on the phenomenon of transformation in South African higher education. This qualitative approach afforded participants a chance to narrate their experiences in in-depth discussions that used critical, challenging questions and probes (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter 2006). Although scholars differ significantly when it comes to the use of case study approaches in research, Baxter and Jack (2008:4) argues that a case study approach can be considered when:

- the focus of the study is to answer 'how' and 'why' questions
- you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study
- you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study
- the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.

A case study was, therefore, the most appropriate method for a study that investigated experiences of a specific group within a specific context and in which participants' contextual conditions would determine their perceptions of the phenomenon under study.

Study population

The study population was women academics at one institution. With the purpose of the study in mind, a first subunit of 12 black women was selected. For this group, maximum variation (Palinkas et al. 2015) was achieved by including women academics from different faculties and post levels at the institution. Four of these women were from a sister campus, which has predominantly black staff and which might have different transformation dynamics. The years of working experience in higher education were also considered important. This is because years of service might have had an influence on how the women viewed their institution's transformation attempts. With the main purpose of testing possible contrasting views on the interpretation of the concept of transformation, especially in a study that sought to understand standpoints, a similar group of four white women academics was also selected.

Data collection

Data was collected mainly through four focus group discussions held with the black women academics. The white women academics were involved in the last focus group, so that their voices could be added to the discussion. The women used their own standpoints and dispositions to interrogate their understanding of the institution's transformation and diversity processes, and they deliberated on how they could contribute to the success of these processes.

Data in this study was analysed using a thematic approach with a critical interpretation. The method involved analysing data to find common threads of information that helped me to make meaning of the data sets (Stead & Bakker 2010). The critical interpretation looked into different aspects of power issues reflected in the women's narratives. This analysis included considering how systemic and structural factors played out in shaping the perspectives of the women involved. Codes were used as participant identifiers during data analysis (Breen 2006). These depicted their race, (black woman [BW], white woman [WW]), position (junior lecturer [JL], lecturer [L], senior lecturer [SL], professor [P]) and the focus group discussion number (FG1–FG4). Member checks were done to ensure that the analyses depicted the expressed views and feelings of the women academics accurately.

Ethical considerations

All women that 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 the institution's education ethics committee (permit number UFS-EDU-2011-0040).

Findings

In accordance with standpoint theory, the research process allowed black women academics to reflect on their transforming institution, using their experiences. Participants could evaluate their dispositions regarding institutional processes of transformation and diversity by placing themselves within these processes, as members who also had an obligation to ensure the success of the processes. While adopting a self-interrogatory approach drove the discussions, the women defined transformation processes in terms of how the institution handled the processes. They also projected their understanding and expectations of how the institution needed to align the processes with the goals of diversity expressed in the institution's mission statement. Through the deliberations, an understanding of transformation as a two-pronged process emerged. Not only did the women understand transformation as an institutional management process, they also understood their obligation to contribute to the success of the process.

Led by the broad perspectival themes that were identified, the findings of the study are presented under four main headings, namely transformation as institutional responsibility; transformation as a personal responsibility; perspectives on institutional dynamics; and contrasting standpoints of white woman academics.

Transformation as an institutional responsibility

Defining *transformation* was a difficult process, because of its complexity. The women involved in the focus group discussions had different understandings of the process, depending on individual standpoints. The women from the main campus and the sister campus used their institutional experiences as well as an understanding of the geographic location of the institutions to define transformation and diversity. As mentioned previously, institutional dynamics are crucial in transformation plans. While the main campus was a racially diverse institution situated in an urban area, the sister campus was predominantly black and situated in a rural area. The two different ecologies themselves led to different understandings of transformation. While women from the main campus emphasised that 'more black women have to be considered for senior positions if this institution is serious about transformation', those of the other campus were concerned about 'our black campus, which consists mostly of academics without PhDs … our students complain about this a lot and have even raised it with the rectorate'. These different understandings already point to the complications that institutional management have to grapple with in transforming the institution. However, despite the complexity of the concept, there was consensus that:

> 'The minute you talk about transforming something, it means you are changing something completely, overhauling it.' (BW1, L, FG1)

> 'Transformation is an active [*action*] word. Transforming means there is a new way of doing things.' (BW4, L, FG1)

The women indicated that overhauling institutional structures included the 'way the institution is addressing diversity on the campus' (BW6, L, FG1), and, to them, diversification was 'a huge word with a lot of impact' (BW4, L, FG1) on the daily running of the institution. The women explained the impact was on the visibility and success of women academics at the institution. Hence, issues of 'equity and equality', which most studies in South Africa have reported as needing attention (SAHRC 2018), became essential for conceptualising diversity and transformation. *Equity* refers to the visible diversity of the mass of women who gained access to the institution, while equality means parity in success. We need to consider that black women academics, at the time of the study, were mostly concentrated in junior positions and were not visible in research. Although the groups participating in this study consisted of white women academics as well, issues the groups discussed focused mainly on black women academics. By viewing black women from the position of a group that was under-represented within the staff component, that faced challenges relating to upward mobility and that had to endure a culture of white male supremacy, the women were of the opinion

that transformation had to be primarily an institutional process of redress, one that mainly needed to be driven by the institution's management:

'… there are certain procedures to be put in place, certain systems and policy changes, whatever … and we cannot do much to see to it that that kind of change is implemented at this level.' (BW9, JL, FG2)

The kind of transformation that this statement alludes to is a reformation transformation (Badat 2010), which focuses on policies and practices. Such transformation addresses issues of policy formulation, which, in the case of gender diversity, includes matters pertaining to 'equity and equality'. The fact that the institution under study, and a number of other institutions in South Africa, did not have gender equity policies (Zwane et al. 2015) was indicative of the unwillingness of institutions to make necessary reformations in this regard. Focused policies that spell out recruitment and retention matters, as well as the institutional obligation to institute capacity-building measures aimed at black women academics at the two campuses, were absent. These thoughts were expressly voiced in the focus group discussion:

'I would say the [institution] is transforming if they could address issues of equity.' (BW5, L, FG2)

If diversifying the institutional space through successful gender considerations became the key goal of the institution, the women were adamant that recognition of the physical presence of the black women academics, as well as successful participation therein, needed to be taken seriously:

'What is the institution doing to recruit more black women into the institutional space, and what is it doing to develop the black female academic? Are there gender offices within the institution that oversee the success of this group? Transformation for me is about the institution responding to these critical questions.' (BW7, SL, FG2)

The question on the recruitment of black women was important to the women, because not only were black women, especially at the main campus, underrepresented, but they were also confined to the lower ranks of lecturer and junior lecturer. The situation was even more dire at the sister campus, where, as indicated earlier, the staff component consisted of 'mainly people without PhDs' (BW9, JL, FG2). While the women were aware of the criteria for promotion, which placed research as the most important component of promotions, the women questioned the institution's readiness and willingness to capacitate black women to move up the academic ladder. This concern resonates with the overall national concern on the scarcity of black women in senior positions (DHET 2016), which they could only attain if they could actively engage in research and publishing. The black women held the belief that the institution could only claim to have transformed if its capacity-building programmes targeted women in general and black women in particular. It was the women's standpoint position that, as there was need for women to participate more actively in knowledge production, the institution needed to create spaces that would equip them with skills to achieve this goal. This was a concern, specifically, for the women at the sister campus, who were concerned about their postgraduate studies. Their challenge was that they had to carry enormous teaching loads, because they were junior lecturers. This denied them the time and space to progress with their own PhD studies.

Transformation as a personal responsibility

It was interesting to note that, while the women understood transformation and diversity as mainly a management responsibility, they moved beyond that narrow understanding, to include themselves as responsible parties in the success of the processes. One of the women stated in the focus group discussion:

'It [transformation] is a change that has to happen, but there should be self-awareness first, individual awareness. Transformation is an individual thing and an institutional thing. There can't be institutional transformation if there isn't individual transformation.' (BW2, SL, FG3)

The critical understanding that emerges from this statement relates to the importance of self-awareness and individual responsibility for transformation. Black women academics' responsibility towards the transformation process at the institution immediately became clear in the statement. The women needed to make a mindshift, from that of entitlement as a previously marginalised group, to that of assuming shared responsibility for and accountability to the advancement of transformation, as well as appreciation of diversity in the institution. It could have been easy for the women to adopt a victim standpoint and to use the state-led position on women empowerment (DHET 2016) to make a claim against the institution – after all, institutions are required by higher education regulations (Badat 2010) to prioritise black women in transformation initiatives. This entitlement mentality has been observed in a number of other spheres in the country, in which citizens have stopped being proactive, but merely make demands of government (Seepe & Mthembu 2011). The participants emphasised that black women had to avoid this mentality from creeping in and realise the responsibility they carried to contribute to the success of transformation at the institution. This sentiment was presented thusly:

'[Transformation entails] knowing yourself and where you come from and understanding other people around you and where they come from.' (BW1, L, FG1)

'[It entails] appreciating that we are black and we are women without attaching any negative connotation to the concepts or feeling any sense of entitlement.' (BW7, SL, FG1)

One woman in the team presented her thoughts on self-awareness and appreciation succinctly by stating that:

'This will help us to accept that we have strengths that the other people might not have, and that we have weaknesses and allow others to help us with these. By so doing we will also learn to accept the role of others in our academic lives, and as a result see that we need each other. Isn't it how we will celebrate diversity and avoid racial and gender tensions within the university?' (BW2, SL, FG3)

Although in the beginning the women wanted to hold the institution solely accountable for the transformation agenda, they later realised that their contribution was equally important. They realised that, especially at the level of interpersonal relationships and through extra effort in building own capacity through research endeavours and group mentoring, they could achieve plenty and capacitate themselves for the upward mobility about which they were concerned. Regarding their responsibility in relation to research, they resolved that:

'You[*an academic*] are independent, do your own research. How far you develop is also dependent on your own effort, collaborations and all that. Much of it is also dependent on you, as much as maybe the HOD [*head of department*] and the dean still need to do their part, but a lot of it is also dependent on you.' (BW1, L, FG3)

The realisation expressed here pushed these women to reflect on their practice as academics, while they understood the importance of the institution's responsibility in this regard. They had initially only framed their understanding of transformation narrowly, on what the institution was failing to do for them. More importantly, there were concerning systemic challenges that they had to face as black women academics. Included in these challenges were stereotypes of black women academics as lacking expertise held by colleagues (especially white colleagues), being seen as nothing but equity appointments, having to endure the culture of whiteness and male domination, being excluded through language and an overall lack of a sense of belonging. The women felt strongly that they could either bow down and succumb to the stereotypes or move beyond them, by challenging themselves to do more. They needed to understand this positioning and the standpoint it placed them in and use it as a resilience-building mechanism that could assist them to move forward. Smith (1992:329) cautions against succumbing to negative constructions as follows:

We [*women*] do not reiterate what we are constructed to be, but we explore the constructions to go beyond what is implicated by them. (Smith 1992:329)

This realisation shows that the women's standpoints and how they are constructed should not constrain them and cause them to affirm stereotypes. Instead, such stereotypes should serve as a powerbase that helps them to understand the systems of oppression and find ways to deal with them (Brooks 2006; Harding 2004).

Institutional dynamics in transformation

By reflecting on progress achieved by the institution on transformation, the women acknowledged that the institution had made noticeable strides towards transformation. They believed that, as a way of acknowledging the progress that had been made, it was important to consider institutional dynamics. The institution had been an historically white Afrikaans-medium university. The dawn of democracy and new government policies that demanded educational reforms

(CHE 1997) also entailed a merger between this institution and another institution in the same area. This meant that institutional cultures and climates needed to be overhauled to accommodate the merger. Taking this challenge into cognisance was important for the women academics in the study, because any reflection on transformation progress had to consider history. The women themselves stated that it was important to have an understanding of the history of the institution:

'When it comes to the university, a person should also understand how the institution was *fifty* years ago and how it is today so that one can see if transformation is taking place.' (BW7, SL, FG2)

The women likened the difficult task of transforming an institution to a gemstone with different facets:

'Transformation [*at this institution*] is like taking a gemstone, which when you look at it has things you can see with your eyes, but if you project the light, you see things that you cannot see with naked eyes.' (BW1, L, FG1)

The metaphor of a gemstone used by this participant presents a critical point, which emphasises the importance of considering all angles when interrogating the progress that institutions make in transforming their spaces. Focus should not be mono-dimensional, nor should it be only on the negatives – it is important to look at achievements, too. In the context of institutional cultures, the preceding statement, furthermore, makes a case for acknowledging the complexity involved in understanding and successfully attaining transformation at the institution. On the surface, the institutional community could have expected that creating equity and equality would be easy. However, institutional knowledge pertaining to the culture and history of the institution would lay bare the difficulties that the institution had to overcome in making transformation a reality, especially for black women constituencies. Alluding to the difficult dynamics relating to transformation at the institution, the women expressed that '[*one*] only gets to understand those if [*one*] has crossed a lot of people's paths in this institution' (BW7, SL, FG3). The statement alludes to an awareness that the institution might have been struggling with transformation, but there were areas in which it was making progress. This realisation made the women appreciate the institution's efforts, and they adopted a stance that acknowledged that they were co-accountable with the institution for transforming it.

Contrasting standpoints of black and white women academics

An interesting result of the focus group discussion comprising both black and white women academics was the way different standpoints influenced perspectives on transformation at the institution. According to the black women, the institution had to focus more on redress and restitution. They indicated that they measured transformation on the following:

'… the institution's ability to reflect on the restitution, which means moving away from the past and working on addressing all issues that have led to imbalances, especially gender and race imbalances.' (BW3, JL, FG4)

'… [*the*] proper representation, which reflects the society within which the institution exists.' (BW1, L, FG4)

These views, expressed by the black women, contrasted with the views held by the white colleagues in the group, who stated:

'The institution is paying too much attention in trying to be politically right … it pays attention more to race than gender.' (WW3, L, FG4)

'You shouldn't think that I am jealous. I am absolutely not, but do you think what the management is doing is right? I don't see our people having a future here. The focus is on black people. They seem to have forgotten that we [*white women academics*] were also marginalised. I think transformation focus has to shift.' (WW1, SL, FG4)

It became clear in this session that, even though participants shared the status of 'womanhood', their locations (standpoints), brought about by race, differed. The white women colleagues were opposed to transformation attempts that were meant to redress the past ills that related to black women's issues. According to one of them:

'The status quo was that a black man, black woman and a white female [*had always*] assumed a second class position to the so-called superior role of the white male. So it is not only black women that are marginalised in this regard.' (WW2, P, FG4)

This statement brings out a painful misconception of South African history, according to which some black people viewed all white people as privileged. Black people had always been oblivious to the gender-based oppression that the white Afrikaner woman suffered and the marginalisation therein (McClintock 1991). While the Afrikaner woman had gained access to the university space earlier than the black woman had, the culture, tradition and beliefs about women as home-carers had limited the Afrikaner woman's choices to administrative and clerical jobs (Alexander & Simons 1959; Van der Westhuizen 2013). In spite of this reality, the burden of double marginalisation of black women (Bantu Education Act 1953; Extension of the University Education Act, 1959) within an intersectionality of race and gender needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Nevertheless, the white women academics believed that certain aspects of transformation needed to consider them as a marginalised group too. One woman pointed this out when she said:

'Let me take an Afrikaner woman, she has never been given power before; that is why when she finally gains power through promotions, she usually uses it as an oppressive tool.' (WW2, P, FG4)

Assuming different standpoints here might have led to misconceptions about one another and, in turn, the racial tensions that the institution was experiencing at the time. Each group believed that the other was in an advantaged position and was being given priority by virtue of the colour of their skin. The following expression by a white colleague hints at the bottled and simmering anger that groups might have harboured about each other. This was a response to the point raised on the need for black women to be capacitated:

'I never had any mentoring when I first came to the university. Maybe black women need it because their circumstance is different.' (WW1, SL, FG4)

Important as it is to understand that women have generally been marginalised, and to understand the anger that this woman expressed, the debate around transformation has to be understood within broader national issues, which have rendered black women as the most marginalised members of society and institutions.

Implications for further research

Understanding the lived and told experiences of black women academics, as presented herein, refers directly to issues of policy development. The findings presented indicate that gender issues in higher education need to find space in development. The findings beg the following questions: How do institutions of higher learning in South Africa respond to gender equity matters, especially as they pertain to black women academics? In what way are gender policies translated into practice in South African higher education? These questions, and many others that tap into gender policy development in higher education, need to drive conversations meant to advance gender equity and equality in institutions.

Conclusion

This article shed light on the importance of standpoints in understanding and appreciating transformation and diversity in higher education in South Africa. An exploration of an understanding of the process of transformation illuminated how black women academics' standpoints and dispositions could provide a more nuanced interpretation of the process of transformation at institutions of higher learning. The complex nature of transformation is presented clearly in this article. The article argues for acknowledging the role of context and the need to consider institutional dynamics in transformation plans. The metaphor of a gemstone, expressed by a participant during the study, emphasises the importance of adopting a multidimensional view on transformation, one that considers all facets and the multilayered complexities that institutions have to face when dealing with the processes of transformation and diversification.

A further critical point highlighted by the article is that transformation attempts and plans have to depart from the history of gender in the South African education system. While both institutions and the government in South Africa have constantly highlighted this argument, the article makes a significant contribution to providing a fresher understanding of transformation, as a personal responsibility and self-awareness process. Arising clearly from the findings is an emphasis on co-accountability for the success of transformation in institutions of higher learning. The argument presented is that the burden of transformation should not be placed solely on institutions' management – instead, individuals should also assume responsibility.

While negative institutional dynamics might be working against a positive outlook on transformation for black women, the article highlights the need to use negative experiences as a power base and springboard to build resilience and move forward towards successful transformation. The article explains that this is only possible if black women understand their standpoints and locations and the influence that these might have on their perceptions. Including women from different race groups unearthed the roles that context, location and positionality play in the way institutional communities interpret transformation in their institutions. It could be argued that this article helps to take gender discourses forward within South African higher education, which is still awash with gender inequalities.

Acknowledgements
Competing interests

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