

## **Navigating a diverse university context in South Africa: A student's narrative about identity formation**

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This article focuses on the navigation and negotiation of a Zulu student on a diverse university campus in South Africa. Students in higher education institutions bring their life stories, shaped by lived experiences, culture, history, and language, to the campus, while the interconnection between race, language, culture, and gender creates new possibilities for identity formation. The study is guided by the central research question: How do students navigate and negotiate their narrative identities in a diverse university context? Reflective writing exercises and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from a black male isiZulu-speaking student. Using the narrative methodology, the lived experiences of the participant were explored. Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory was employed as a theoretical lens. An inductive thematic analysis highlighted the following themes in the data: language and race; culture; gender and sexuality; and social class. The findings reveal that narrative identities can be negotiated and navigated through re-creation, adaptation, and limited adjustment.

### **Introduction**

In a world where migration between countries and borders has become a common phenomenon, the diversity of students is becoming more complex. Changes in student demographics have prompted university management to adjust their vision and mission statements (Phillips, 2019). Diversity includes dimensions of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and culture. Furthermore, diversity on university campuses includes representation and intergroup relations and presents challenges such as inclusion and a sense of belonging (Swain 2013). In the new democratic South Africa, students have experienced these challenges daily since 1994.

Extensive research has been conducted on the navigation and negotiation of students on campus regarding one to three social categories (Groenewald, 2023; Graham-Bailey et al., 2019; Le Roux & Groenewald 2021; Morales, 2014; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Strayhorn 2018). This study explores the navigation and negotiation of a student focusing on six social categories (language and race; culture; gender and sexuality; and class).

This article arises from a longitudinal study in which the narratives of eight students' identities were explored over four years. Data were generated through reflective exercises and semi-structured interviews. The paper has been organised as follows: The first section provides an overview of the term 'identity' and higher education in South Africa. Second, a discussion of the theoretical framework is presented, namely the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979). Thereafter, a motivation for the chosen methods is presented. The lived experiences of the participant are discussed using the following themes: language and race; culture; gender and sexuality; and social class. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings.

## Overview of identity

The term 'identity' originates from the Latin word *idem* and means 'sameness' (Rowlands, 1994). However, the term contains a paradox since it refers to both unity and diversity. On the one hand, the identity of individuals is distinctive and a way of distinguishing themselves from others, but, on the other hand, identity also involves a connection with a social group (Wu, 2019). The intrapersonal essence of identity focuses on personal characteristics such as the perspectives, beliefs, goals, and values of the individual, while the interpersonal nature of identity is directed towards interactions of the individual in the social world (Granic, Morita & Scholten, 2015). Therefore, the paradox inherent in the term 'identity' refers to the tension between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal nature of identity.

Busacchi (2018) distinguishes between permanence (*idem*) and change (*ipse*) in an attempt to describe identity. The individual remains the same person, experiencing a sense of permanence and unity with respect to experiences, memories, and expectations. However, the individual changes over time regarding behaviour, interpretations, and perceptions (Mallett & Wapshott 2012). The intrapersonal nature of identity (personal characteristics) therefore remains the same, whereas the interpersonal nature of identity (social characteristics) changes as the individual moves between networks of relationships and new contexts.

According to Berezina, Gill, and Bovina (2020), personal identity is tied to individuals and internalised by individuals, while social identity is linked to groups. However, the way in which individuals experience their identity will depend on and be interceded by their social group or category membership, such as race, gender, religion, class, language, sexual orientation, physical ability, and language (Yılmaz & Bağçe 2020). Tatum (2000) referred to these categories of difference as the dominant group (agent), experiencing privilege, and the subordinate group (target), experiencing disadvantage. Dominant groups assign roles to subdominant groups that reflect the lower status of the subdominant groups. Consequently, our identities place us in a social world and influence everything we do, say, or think (Appiah, 2020). Identities can change over time, and people negotiate and navigate as they move from one place to another. Therefore, the way in which students interpret and develop their identities will be influenced by the context in which they find themselves, which, in turn, is shaped by history and ideologies (Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty 2018). Our negotiation and navigation in networks of relationships and history are therefore determined by our intra- and interpersonal identities, and our uniqueness and socialisation are again determined by our interaction in our environment.

Socialisation and human development are based on two conflicting factors, namely agency versus communality, individuality versus collectivity, or self versus others (Myles, 2018). The narrative identity approach has been used by Bamberg and Wipff (2020) and Wehrman (2018), among others, to balance the dual nature of identity. Ruohotie-Lyhty (2018) used narrative identity formation to find a balance between agency and communality. To enhance our understanding of intra- and interpersonal identities, the

function of agency and communality should be taken into account. Agency (intra-personality) as a function of socialisation strengthens the individual's sense of self as a unique and individual person. Agency refers to the individual's sense of responsibility for their own life and decisions (Mameli, Molinari & Passini 2019). Francis and Le Roux (2011, 301) referred to agency as the 'dynamic and dialectical nature of the interaction between the individual and the social context, as well as the active role of the individual in identity construction'. Agency is therefore supported by the underlying process of differentiation (Ramarajan 2014). Differentiation is intrapersonal and centres on the distinction of various aspects of the self. Therefore, each individual has intrapersonal characteristics that distinguish them from others.

The social function of socialisation, in turn, reinforces the individual's sense of belonging and concern for others. Communalism (inter-personality) – or the social function of socialisation – is focused on processes that facilitate connectivity and community (Lozada et al., 2022). Socialisation is a complex interactive process and involves mechanisms such as observation, imitation, and internalisation. Imitating observed behaviour is reinforced by a social group (such as language, religion, sexual preference, race, and culture) and ensures that the observed behaviour is internalised (Heylighen et al., 2018). Harro's (2000, 16) cycle of socialisation illustrates the way in which individuals adopt the values, norms, and expectations of family, friends, and neighbours. Institutions such as schools and churches, as well as cultural groups, further reinforce the personal and stereotypical messages that the individual receives. The individual adopts the behaviour, attitudes, and perceptions of the social group and accordingly becomes a part of the social group. Through socialisation, each member of the community learns the attitudes, language, behaviour, and skills necessary to act effectively in a community. Therefore, socialisation prepares the individual to fulfil dominant or subdominant roles (Tatum, 2000). The underlying process of socialisation is integration. Inter-personality is focused on the integration of participation, connection, and communalism with others (Calhoun, 1992). However, for healthy human development, there should be a balance between differentiation (intra-psyche) and integration (inter-personal). Individuals consequently require a sense of uniqueness that distinguishes them from others and a sense of belonging that makes them part of a social group.

In addition to personal and social identity, De Fina (2013) identified a third type of identity, namely positional identity. Positional identity can be defined as roles that are linked to a specific context of interaction, such as teacher and student in the university context. Positional identity can also be linked to intra- and interpersonal identity, since each individual maintains particular perspectives regarding the role he or she plays in a specific context. Individual perspectives are influenced by the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of the social group.

### **South African higher education**

In 1994, education transformation was high on the agenda of the new democratic system in South Africa. Since then, higher education has been characterised by the transition

from an elite system to a mass higher education system, significant growth, extensive restructuring, and student protests (Webbstock, 2016). New policies subsequently aimed to address the inequalities of the past, while transformation within higher education would play a critical role in training socially accountable, autonomous citizens with skills in a growing, non-racial, progressive democracy (Webbstock, 2016).

The policy changes in South African higher education were also influenced by global trends in higher education. The changes in higher education after 1994 are a direct result of trends such as the growing globalisation of higher education, the market orientation of higher education, changes in technology that affect teaching and learning, management styles, and the drastic increase in student numbers (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). The *Education White Paper 3, A Programme for Higher Education Transformation* of 1997 set out the vision of a transformed higher education system guided by principles of equality, redress, democracy, development, quality, efficiency, effectiveness, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability (Department of Education, 1997). These principles imply that institutions should respect and acknowledge diverse religious, cultural, and language differences.

In the past decade, there has been an increase of more than 50% in university enrolment, and in 2012, the National Development Plan predicted a further growth from 17.9% to 25% in 2030 (Anonymous, 2015). The 23 existing South African universities could no longer accommodate the growing number of school leavers with university admission qualifications seeking university admission. In 2014, the first university in the Northern Cape was established to provide for the increase in growth and access to university education in South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). University X was established without the scars of a 'previously disadvantaged', 'historically white', or 'bush university' (Anonymous 2013).

## **Theoretical framework**

The study is informed by the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979).

### **Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory**

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory was developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup differentiation. The focus of this theory is on the individual in the group, and it is accepted that individuals are partially defined by their social group membership (Hogg, 1996). Social identity is both individual and social. Each identity (such as gender and nationality) cannot be reduced to the individual's individuality, but is embedded in historical and cultural processes (Valentin, 2014). Depending on the social context in which individuals move, they accordingly have a self-identity and multiple social identities. Social identities act as a conduit through which the community reaches the individual.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed three processes through which the in-group (us) is evaluated against the out-group (them), namely self-categorisation, social identification,

and social comparison. As such, the focus is on self-categorisation as the process through which the individual's social understanding of others becomes entangled with the opinions of the group (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Self-categorisation changes as our relationships change over space and time; as a social representation of the individual in context, it changes with the context. Self-categorisation is comparable, variable, fluid, and context dependent. The self is an expression of a dynamic process of social evaluation. Self-categorisation is a reflective evaluation in which individuals are described in respect of their own frame of reference. This description allows individuals to regulate themselves in relation to the ever-changing social reality (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

Individuals are bound together by a sense of belonging to the same social category. The behaviour of group members does not depend on the position of a specific individual, but rather on the sociocultural meanings associated with the specific social category (Oyserman & Markus, 2014). Social identification is the process through which an individual publicly identifies with an in-group and has the following antecedents: the clarity (disposition) of the values and practices of the group in relation to those of comparable groups, and the performance of the group (Hogg, 1996). Social identification affects the individual's self-confidence through intergroup comparison and influences the outcomes associated with group formation, such as intragroup cohesion, cooperation, altruism, positive evaluation, loyalty, and pride (Tajfel & Turner 1979). As groups and their status change, social comparison will continue to take place, and individuals will navigate and negotiate their social identity. Individuals prefer to be associated with an in-group to ensure security and a positive social identity. Who we are is partially defined by who we are not. Identity formation is a fluid process and the result of the individual's interaction in the social world. Social identification and social comparison can help us understand the behaviour of individuals in the social world (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

## Methods and data

This article is part of a longitudinal study that tracks the formation of narrative identities of eight students on a multicultural South African campus over a four-year period. The research context in this study is a South African university – a symbol of the new democratic South Africa – as reflected in the vision of the institution (Anonymous 2015): [vision statement quotation not presented, in order to sustain anonymisation of University X; however keywords "social justice" and "democratic practice" may be cited].

The aim of this qualitative study is to describe and understand the manner in which a student negotiates and navigates the formation of his narrative identity on a diverse university campus. Reality is socially constructed, and research can only be conducted through interaction between a researcher and a participant (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). Therefore, the study is guided by an interpretive approach, which is further refined by social constructivism. A narrative methodology is particularly suitable for understanding people's lived experiences. Autoethnography, a form of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2013), involves self-reflection to explore the connections between individual experiences and social contexts (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2015). Experiences are presented through stories

and, in the process, meaning and narrative identities are constructed. Somers (1994) believed that individuals make sense of the social world through narrativity; however, the individual is embedded in relationships and stories that change over time and space. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory also emphasises the historical and cultural embeddedness of each individual.

In this article, I focus on the lived experiences of Shaka (pseudonym), a black isiZulu-speaking student, to explore how the student navigated and negotiated his narrative identity on the diverse university campus. Shaka enrolled for a four-year Bachelor of Education degree, with majors in Mathematics and Science (mostly male-dominated) at University X.

According to Burmeister and Aitken (2012), qualitative studies emphasise rich descriptions and in-depth narratives of participants, rather than quantity. The data for the study were collected over a period of four years through reflective writing exercises and semi-structured interviews. In the first year, the reflective writing exercises and interviews focused on home, school, and community experiences. The data generated during Shaka's second, third, and fourth years focused on his institutional experiences. In the extensive process of data generation, rich data on the construction of the narrative identity of a student were generated.

Shaka completed the reflective writing exercises at home after specific instructions were provided to him. Reflection helps one to think back on one's experiences that occur within a three-dimensional space of temporality, place, and sociality (Clandinan & Caine 2008). Through self-examination, Shaka relived his experiences and became the author of his own story, as explained by Park (2013). Shaka's reflective writing served as a background and starting point for each interview. The interviews of approximately one hour each provided me with the opportunity to delve deeper into Shaka's lived experiences on a diverse university campus. With his permission, recordings were made of each interview. After the raw data had been transcribed, Shaka had the opportunity to review the accuracy of the transcriptions.

Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify themes in the transcriptions and reflective writing exercises that represent a certain level of patterned meaning in the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Shaka's navigation and negotiation on campus are presented in a storyline from which the following themes emerged: language and race; culture; gender and sexuality; and class.

The validity of narrative research lies in participants' lived experiences, focusing on the comparisons readers make with the lived stories they know (Bold, 2011). The validity of the study was improved by allowing the participant to verify the authenticity and accuracy of the transcriptions. Participation in the study provided the participant with the opportunity to reflect on his lived experiences. This introspection contributed to a better understanding of who he was. The university granted ethics clearance, and the participant signed an informed consent form. Pseudonyms were given to the participant and contexts to protect the participant's identity.

## Findings

Shaka was born in the north of KwaZulu-Natal, a province of South Africa. His mother still lived with her parents, and their house was already overcrowded. Shaka's parents decided that it would be best for him to grow up with his father's sister in Ingwadebe (pseudonym), also in KwaZulu-Natal. The aunt with whom he lived passed away in his Grade 10 year and Shaka was sent to live with another aunt in Kiesersville (pseudonym) in the Northern Cape. Shaka's experiences regarding language, race, gender, and class are interconnected over time and space, and this integration of experiences not only provides a better understanding of otherness but also creates his unique story (Somers 1994).

### Language and race

Shaka's interaction in the social environment is illustrated by his language use and communication. He is multilingual and speaks isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Swahili. The South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) recognises 11 official languages: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu. Shaka's community narratives show that he grew up mostly among isiZulu speakers. After moving to a new province and school in his Grade 11 year, Shaka had to switch to isiXhosa and English. Shaka speaks isiZulu with his friends on campus, and English with other racial groups. He has tried to speak Setswana, but 'the Tswanas laughed, so I decided that I will not speak Tswana because I don't like people to laugh at me'. He has noticed that Tswanas 'speak English, then switch to Setswana'. Sometimes he cannot find the right English word and 'ends up saying it in isiZulu'. Shaka was initially shy about speaking English, but his interaction with other students on campus has improved his English. Social identity is negotiable and has value and emotional meaning for the individual (Appiah, 2020; Tajfel & Turner 1979). In Shaka's case, it is clear that his socialisation on campus has led him to speak English more often, and this has increased his self-confidence and his sense of belonging (Lozada et al., 2022). Although he understands Setswana and some Afrikaans, he quickly informs someone when he does not understand what is being said. Shaka took Setswana as a Conversational Language in his third and fourth years. Although he currently feels more comfortable speaking Setswana, he is aware of his accent.

Shaka's narratives indicate that he primarily socialised with black isiZulu-speaking people in his community space. Due to his socialisation, social categorisation eventually began to function for Shaka as social stereotyping (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as he began to make certain assumptions about White and Brown people based on the actions of a few individuals from these groups. Before Shaka joined the university, his interaction with Coloured and White groups was limited. In the South African context, the concept of a Coloured identity is much broader than race and ethnicity and is described as 'a dynamic and fluid identity belonging to a specific group in South Africa, most often attributed to persons popularly perceived as being of mixed racial and ethnic descent who, over time and due to specific historical, cultural, social and other factors, have undergone various changes in their perceptions of their identity as Coloured people' (Petrus & Isaacs-Martin 2012, 88).

Shaka initially thought that Coloured people had traditions, while he associated White people with being discriminative. On campus, Shaka observed that 'some people address you in a different way with disrespect'. He noticed that most Tswanas did not show respect, and while he previously thought that Coloured people were rude, he observed on campus that 'Tswanas are doing that thing that has been told about Coloureds'. According to Shaka, Tswanas are stubborn people who do not want to hear when they are wrong, and he cannot identify with the values and attitudes of particular Setswana speakers. Tajfel and Turner (1979) pointed out that social identification with a group does not necessarily imply that all the values and attitudes of the group are adopted.

Shaka's dimensions of race and language are centred on his identity and become more or less prominent when integrated with contextual factors. In new contexts and relationships, Shaka therefore constantly tries to position himself to develop a sense of place. His first challenge at university was related to the way in which social categorisation is linked to roles, characters, events, and ideologies, which are sometimes stereotypical in nature (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Overall, Shaka has had a positive experience with the different racial groups on campus. He said what helped him get along with all the people was that he had no expectations – he just entered the campus as a new student.

### **Culture**

Shaka does not follow the Zulu traditions strictly. However, he does support the idea that the man is the head of the family, while it is the woman's responsibility to cook and take care of the children. He described the community in Ingwadebe, where he grew up, as 'rough'. If someone is caught stealing, the entire community is informed and 'they will gather and beat the person; if the issue was big (maybe killed [sic] or raped), they burn the person to death'. For Shaka, this behaviour emphasises how important it is not to steal. In the community, young girls are prepared for the world of women and motherhood, and their virginity is tested. The members of the community also support one another in times of need and pray for one another. During traditional events, community members come together and slaughter a cow, and when someone has passed away, the family of the deceased is supported with groceries. According to the Zulu tradition, a man can have more than one wife, 'as long as you can look after them'. Although Shaka has no problem with these traditions and intends to follow them himself, he sees his family as more modern, not following all Zulu traditions so closely.

There are only a few Zulu girls on campus, and the Zulu male students 'like to stick around each other, we are friends but we are brothers also'. They regard the Zulu girls on campus as their 'sisters' and they have to 'look after them'. Shaka commented that the Zulu and Tswana cultures had many similarities. Comparing these two cultures helped Shaka evaluate the qualities of his own culture against those of another culture before identifying with it (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

Shaka has always identified with the Zulu culture. As there were few Zulu girls at University X, he began to identify similarities between the Tswana and Zulu cultures. His institutional narratives show that he learnt to think critically, and that helped him to think.



An individual's intrapersonal identity is also formed by life lessons, and life lessons that bring about good values, norms, attitudes, and perspectives facilitate interaction in the social environment. Indirectly, life lessons lead to the formation of a life culture. Shaka's community narratives show that he was taught to take care of himself from a young age. His culture taught him the value of respect and care, while his Christian faith helped him survive difficult times. Shaka's institutional narratives show that the life lessons he learnt on campus boil down to the following: 'to follow my heart, take best decisions, think twice before doing something to reduce regrets'. These life lessons have helped him to act respectfully and responsibly.

Shaka plays chess for the university and, in doing so, is exposed to new experiences, new places, and new ways of thinking. Chess has taught him to think not only from his side but also from his opponent's side. When he approaches a person with whom he is experiencing a problem, he realises: 'I have to think from my side and from your side.' He has also learnt to formulate his thoughts clearly to reduce the chances of being misinterpreted. Shaka has won awards for chess, acted as the chair of the university's chess club, and managed to see new places through chess championships.

As a residence student, everything is easy for Shaka. For example, he no longer has to cook, 'which is the kind of work that I would definitely have to do at home'. He had to adapt to a life without parental supervision and with new academic challenges. His best experience at University X was 'freshers and some residence parties'; however, parties caused him to neglect his academic studies, and even though he passed all his subjects, he feels it is 'not in the way that I want to pass them'. The advantage of these parties was that he got to know other people, and their social negotiation brought his predetermined assumptions about particular groups into question. Shaka enjoys his social life, 'which reduced the chances of me feeling isolated or not having that sense of belonging'. His positive social identity is visible in his comfortable interaction with other students and forms a bridge between him and his social environment (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). He is popular on campus and writes that at the end of his first year, 'almost 50% of students knew me even though I know less than 20%'. He realises that his neat way of dressing can create the impression that he is wealthy and sees it as a possible reason for his popularity.

Shaka's friends are humble, and he can depend on them and trust them. His positive social identity contributes to his ability to socialise comfortably and with self-confidence on campus. His self-confidence testifies to his satisfaction with his personal characteristics and, therefore, he has not adopted the values, attitudes, and perceptions of any group. Shaka has only a few friends who share the same values and norms as he. These positive intrapersonal characteristics of Shaka have facilitated his socialisation on campus and contributed to his sense of belonging.

### **Gender and sexuality**

Regarding gender roles, Shaka was taught that women and girls are responsible for household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and washing. Men should know how to clean the garden and 'how to fight so that we can protect our wives and children'. The man is

the head of the family and is supposed to work for his family – ‘for you to call yourself a man, we believe that you must build yourself a house and get a wife’. Once boys are old enough, they should leave their parents’ house and live in the outside room. During that time, they learn more about their clan name. Boys are also advised not to play with girls (Harro, 2000). However, since Shaka was the only child in his aunt’s house, he had to help with household chores.

Shaka mentioned that there were Zulu girls on campus who were ‘ok with the role of the [sic] women in the household’. Although it is not difficult for him to get a girlfriend, he said, ‘I have my own standard’, which, for him, means a girl with ‘manners and respect’. Shaka may also date a girl from another cultural group, and he said that her family would not have a problem with it. For Shaka, shared values and norms in a relationship are, therefore, more important than being members of the same cultural group, and by categorising the role of a woman, Shaka places great value on shared norms and attitudes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Shaka’s narratives show that his culture prescribes stereotypical gender roles, and his institutional narratives reinforce his patriarchal view of the man as the head of the household. He believes that men and women cannot be ‘equal partners’; to the contrary, he thinks that such a view is ‘kind of killing our culture’, as girls now want ‘50/50, so what you see might not really stand’. Tajfel and Turner (1979) pointed out that social identity includes an evaluative component that involves positive or negative group evaluation, and in Shaka’s case, he believes that equal gender roles negatively affect his culture. Furthermore, Shaka’s institutional narratives show that he has heard about feminism at university for the first time in his life. He will never agree with feminism and wrote that ‘life in SA is becoming like this [rapidly changing] because of people enforcing [a] feminism culture’. Shaka does not have a problem with empowering women, but he believes that problems arise when men and women lose respect for each other, and the African identity is lost. He started dating a Setswana girl in his fourth year but has not yet reported on the relationship and thinks that it might be too early to talk about it. He has noticed that the same marriage tradition is shared by the Tswana and the Zulu cultures (Harro, 2000).

Regarding sexuality, Shaka said that his mother’s sister, who was his guardian at the time, ‘turned out to be a lesbian, and she got married’. The girlfriend lives in a *shanti* (house build of roof sheets) and takes care of Shaka, while his aunt lives in the military base camp, where she also works. Shaka remarked that although the lesbian relationship was initially strange to him, he accepted it. Regarding homosexuality, Shaka said that it depended on how one expressed it, and it is acceptable for him ‘if you express it to a person that is interested in your thing’.

### **Class**

Class can be seen as a category of otherness, where high-income groups experience privilege and low-income groups experience disadvantage. Shaka’s narratives show that he had to live with his father’s sister at a young age, as their home had already been

overcrowded and they struggled to survive. Most people in Shaka's community did not attend university and he believes his community is 'dominated by illiterate people'. The community members see him as intelligent and expect him to help them with university-related issues.

A university education can lead to better job opportunities with higher pay and, therefore, a higher status. However, stories shift over space and time, and Shaka's story should be understood against the background of a community that sees a university career as impossible. As such, he is currently studying to open up the unfamiliarity of attending university to the younger generation. On campus, Shaka has realised that a good life is also possible for him, especially as he has been living a 'life of struggles'. He never wants to go back to his old life and said that when he looked at a plate of food, he thought, 'I can cut it into two and eat now and then later.' He said that some students did not want to go home because they knew that they 'would go home and eat cabbage'. Shaka had a difficult time and lived in a shanty for the past few years. In terms of class, he realises that a good life is possible for him.

Shaka was arrested during the #FeesMustFall protest (Langa, 2017; Ndlovu, 2017). Although he was released on the same day, it was frightening when he saw 'police shooting with rubber bullets and a classmate being shot more than five times'. This action gave him the impression that the government 'did not care about their poor', and he participated in 'feesmustfall, but just play on [the] safe side, especially around the police'. He does not support the destruction of infrastructure or the brutal actions of the police but believes that 'there is always a way of letting the government listen'. Shaka prefers a different strategy and believes that burning down buildings 'is money to be used on free education'.

## Conclusion

An experience of identity is mediated by the membership to a social group, such as race, gender, religion, class, language, sexual orientation, physical ability, and more. These categories of difference are related to dominant and subdominant groups, where dominant groups have privilege and subdominant groups experience disadvantage (Tatum, 2000). Identities place us in a social world and influence everything we do, say, and think. One's negotiation and navigation in networks of relationships and history are determined by intrapersonal and interpersonal identities, which, in turn, are influenced by socialisation. Dimensions of race, class, gender, language, and religion become more or less salient when integrated with contextual factors such as family background, sociocultural conditions, current life experiences, and career decisions. The way in which students adapt their narrative identities in a new context depends on the degree to which each one is confronted with difference. Although socialisation in society may assign a dominant status to particular groups and subordination to others, the social space in a university setting brings to the fore the privileging of dominant groups over the disadvantage of subdominant groups (Tatum, 2000). Students bring preconceived ideas about others to campus. In the university context, race is constantly being re-articulated – an action that is simultaneously linked to language, class, and gender.

In the context of internal and external relations of time, place, and power, identity is constructed and reconstructed through consumer behaviour such as popular brands, technology, and entertainment, and influences individuals' self-perception. While students' clothing may contribute to their popularity, it also helps to facilitate socialisation on campus, engagement in student life, and an experience of community through group membership. Students who have previously been exposed to stereotypical gender roles may have their views on gender roles reinforced to such an extent that there is no creation of new identities. Stereotypical gender roles are determined by cultural traditions, communities, and the family (Appiah, 2020).

Class differences often come to the fore on a university campus, and students are sometimes confronted with it for the first time. The #FeesMustFall student protest made students more aware of class differences and elicited various reactions, which could reinforce certain views or contribute to the re-creation of identities. Arrests made during the protest illustrated how students used their identity capital and cultural connection to demand free access to higher education for poor students. Such socially empowering actions by students demonstrate the strengthening of views and insights regarding class differences, thereby opening the potential for the re-creation of narrative identities (Somers, 1994).

Two implications for higher education emerged from this study, namely multilingualism and diversity to the advantage of social justice. Multilingual campuses can facilitate the positive negotiation of narrative identities through differentiation through agency and integration through communality. If students exhibit strong intrapersonal characteristics and identity capital, such as confidence, multilingualism can have a reinforcing influence on the negotiation and navigation of narrative identities. By offering modules such as Conversational Language, students can be encouraged to improve communication in another language. A positive attitude towards minority languages promotes agency and socially empowering actions, which are in line with the transformation vision of higher education.

As English is primarily the language of instruction at universities, there is always a possibility that minority languages may be excluded on a campus. By implication, language practices in institutions can contribute to students not being a part of the learning process. The diversity in languages contributes to code switching, and the negotiation of the status position of languages can lead to tension, division, confusion, and exclusion. It is therefore important to combat intolerance among language groups on campuses and cultivate respect for the different languages on campuses. The management of multilingualism on campuses should be clearly outlined in policy documents to counteract unfair discrimination.

The institutional experiences of exclusion with respect to language, race, and gender indicate a gap in the vision of higher education transformation. Although the formal discourse of universities such as University X is evident in the vision and mission of the institution, it is of the utmost importance that institutions take note of the informal discourse of social relationships at the university. Based on less visible informal discourses

on campus, students often have to negotiate and navigate their narrative identities in unstable discourses. It is therefore important for any institution to manage diversity for the benefit of social justice. While institutional policies must be aligned with the vision of transformation, it is crucial for universities to pay attention to informal discourses. In the university context, vigilance is necessary to prevent the marginalisation of minority groups and practices of inequality and discrimination.

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#### *Declaration of interest*

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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