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Transitions from rural contexts to and through Higher Education in South Africa: negotiating misrecognition

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Abstract

This paper reports on an international collaborative study that investigated how students from rural contexts negotiate the transition to university, and how prior cultural and educational experiences influence their higher education trajectories. A qualitative, participatory methodology was adopted, centred on co-researcher narratives, digital artefacts and discussions. Findings demonstrate how family and community, including religious, study, and self-help groups, influenced their transitions into higher education and journey through university and to their identities, agency and sense of belonging. The paper argues that university practices, values and norms need to acknowledge and incorporate all students' prior experiences and histories and recognise their powerful contribution in working towards a decolonial higher education.

Key words: Transitions, Rurality, Higher Education, Figured Worlds, Misrecognition

Introduction

The collaborative international research project involving South African and United Kingdom (UK) partners investigated how students from rural contexts negotiate the transition to university, and how prior cultural and educational experiences influence their higher education trajectories. To illustrate how student co-researchers negotiated the transition to and through the lived spaces of higher education (HE), the paper draws on narratives, digital artefacts and discussions to demonstrate how family and community, including religious, study and self-help groups, influenced their transitions into higher education and their journey through university. We argue that students' histories and lived experiences in rural contexts help them to negotiate their trajectories across different lived spaces, including spaces still laced with colonial legacies that underpin HE curricular, systems, practices and values, thus shaping their identities, agency and sense of belonging.

This investigation was prompted by the realisation that universities, internationally, are no longer dealing with socio-culturally homogenous cohorts of students (Wilmot and McKenna 2018). The associated massification of HE, internationally, including social inclusion, widening access and lifelong learning, has meant that universities need to re-evaluate their identities and core business in the light of attempts to diversify their student bodies. In South Africa, research shows that the majority of the student body are now first in their families to enter HE and are thus non-traditional students (Mgqwashu,

2014). To that effect, Walker and Mathebula (2019, 2) alert us about ‘the reproductive effects of higher education’ in that some students might experience higher education as a continuation of literacies they already have, while for others, the literacy practices that they bring with them are either not recognized or rewarded in knowledge construction. This situation has the potential to reproduce skewed educational outcomes in favour of students from white and black middle-class, educated backgrounds. Historically under-represented or non-traditional students often belong to minority groups (those of lower socio-economic status, ethnic minority, first-in-family or studying part-time, for example) – students from rural contexts are occasionally considered as part of this category.

In both quantitative and qualitative research on rurality there is a concern that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to define rurality. The concept is at once a demographic, geographic and cultural one (Roberts and Green 2013). It is defined ‘empirically’ as having sparsely populated areas and ontologically as ‘a category and a set of experiences’ (Moreland, Chamberlain, and Artaraz 2003, 56). It is also spatial, geographical and contextual (Green and Reid 2014) and should not be homogenised or essentialised. With regard to South Africa, Mqgwashu (2016) argues that rural students are one of the most marginalised groups that have attracted little attention in widening participation research to date. He argues, further, that higher education encourages students to turn against rural life. This would be unsurprising, if it is the case as Roberts and Green (2013) argue, educationists assume that rural students should become less rural. A study of ‘disadvantaged’ students in higher education in South Africa found that a multiplicity of factors affect transitions from rural areas, including geography, financial resources, schooling, language and ‘other socio-cultural factors’ (Jones et al. 2008). Czerniewicz and Brown (2014) explored the life stories, habitus and social capital of five students from rural contexts. These studies all show that students from rural areas are disproportionately represented in higher education (lower than they should be). The consequence is that the ‘worlds’ these students bring into HE ‘evaporate’ as they are forced to unlearn the practices that have defined who they have become and learn those that will develop practices to survive in the new ‘world’ of academia.

It is for this reason the research reported in this paper is framed theoretically within a sociocultural perspective on learning that recognises that human actions are mediated by physical, social, cultural, historical and material means (Daniels 2015). We investigated how students’ historic and current practices have contributed to the negotiation of transitions from rural contexts into and through higher education as they

encounter different 'figured worlds' (Holland et al. 1998). We employ Fraser's (2003) term 'mis-recognition' in relation to social justice. In addition to *redistribution* of material resources, to ensure participants' independence and voice, social justice requires *recognition* through institutionalised patterns of cultural value that confer respect and the opportunity for achieving social esteem equally to all participants (Fraser 2003). 'Mis-recognition' refers to the absence of equal respect and value, which we will show was a key part of the experiences of transitions from rural contexts to higher education in our study.

In order to engage with the lived experiences of students from rural areas in terms of how these could act to enable or constrain these students as they negotiate their trajectories across different lived spaces in HE, the first section of this paper situates the study in wider international context since the issue of transitioning into and through HE is an international concern, especially for non-traditional students. The paper then moves on to the local South African context since the focus of the investigation concerns the experiences of South African students from rural contexts in HE. Then the theoretical framework adopted in this paper is presented and argued for. The methodology for the study is next explicated, where we foreground the voices of student co-researchers as a critical part in the investigation. The paper then presents findings and discussion. The findings show how students' identities are influenced and changed through transitions, how they use their agency in the process, and make visible instances where they are mis-recognised (Fraser 2003).

The international context

Much of the international literature on student transitions has been driven by a managerial focus to prevent student attrition by improving retention and progression rates (H. Christie et al. 2016). In some of this literature, transitions seem to be narrowly interpreted as the change navigated by students in their movement within and through formal education (Gale and Parker 2014). Furthermore, there remains a prevalent discourse of individualism, resilience, and the need for aspirations (see for example Abbott-Chapman 2011). However, more recently, there has been an increasing emphasis on relational perspectives on student retention and success (Thomas 2012), and for understanding students' transitions into HE as on-going processes of meaning-making where identities are socially and materially negotiated to gain a sense of belonging to the course and university (Masika and Jones 2016; Kahu and Nelson 2018; Timmis and Muñoz-Chereau 2019).

International literature also shows that governments can fail to recognise the impact of their policies in rural areas or tailor education and training to meet the needs of rural communities (Randall, Clews, and Furlong 2015). This is echoed in relation to South Africa by Balfour and Khau (2012), who suggest that educational policy is developed almost exclusively to serve the urban elite and in education faculties in universities, teachers have not been adequately prepared for rural communities and contexts (Masinire and Maringe 2014). An Australian study (Fleming and Grace 2014) highlighted the importance of directly engaging with young people from rural areas, along with their families and communities in understanding the distinctive nature of rural communities as an essential first step to widening participation. Cuervo (2016) goes further in arguing for 'place-based learning' as a 'way of engaging and motivating socially marginalised students or so-called students at risk through a politics of recognition and association that includes and values their contribution to school and the community (Cuervo 2016, 200).

The literature on the influence of rurality on students' transitions to higher education in South Africa appears to be limited. A study about prior learning experiences highlighted how rurality combines with race to co-produce practices, literacies, and values that the students employed when negotiating university spaces (Leibowitz 2010). Kapp and Bangeni (2017) traced Black Humanities students' literacy practices and experiences of university and home over four years. Over time, they show how students' negotiated the ambivalent spaces of both home and university, through constant repositionings (Kapp and Bangeni 2017). However, their study was not specifically on students from rural contexts, where the importance of place, history and community suggest that such repositionings are likely to be even more critical and complex. Walker and Mathebula (2019) investigated low-income young people migrating from rural areas to urban universities. They found that while a rural background is 'not necessarily a disadvantage when it intersects with low income (rather than high income and historical privilege), it manifests as a challenge in students' lives and the making of their new identities' (Walker and Mathebula 2019, 15). Moletsane (2012) argues that a negative feature in research on rurality is a deficit-based approach which instrumentalises actors and denies them agency. Similarly, Fataar and Fillies (2016), writing about rural working-class students in South Africa, challenge the conceptions that they lack the necessary cultural capital for educational success.

Such conceptions are due to the fact that some studies with a focus on higher education transitions from rural contexts tend to concentrate on differential levels of access, social

and spatial disadvantages and isolation (see for example Koricich, Chen, and Hughes 2017), identities and mobilities (Wiborg 2001). Thus, students from rural contexts are often perceived and perceive themselves to be in deficit, particularly when they move into urban universities (Abbott-Chapman 2011), and much of the literature focuses on addressing these barriers. What appears to receive less attention, however, is how the skills, experiences, and knowledges acquired in rural communities and families might support higher education transitions and university learning, which is the focus of this paper.

The South African context

Twenty-five years after the end of apartheid, South Africa's inequalities are still profoundly spatial – nowhere more evident than the provision of basic education to learners (school students) in the 47% primary and secondary rural schools, where learners are remarkably disadvantaged compared to non-rural learners (Mgqwashu 2019). Their schools are poorly resourced in terms of infrastructure (sanitation, classrooms, learning materials and technologies), the best teachers do not find enough incentives to work and stay in rural communities. As a result, students' grades are lower. Although these rural conditions certainly play a big role, Mahlomaholo (2012) argues that leaving school can also be linked to the irrelevance of the curriculum to the 'needs and conditions' of rural settings.

Urban public schools still receive the bulk of government support, as was the case during the apartheid years. Although the ANC (African National Congress) made many statements before and immediately after 1994 about the need to prioritise rural education to rectify past wrongs, limited improvement was achieved in rural schools, especially in the previous Bantustans (Department of Basic Education 2005). Gardiner shows that rural schools do not receive special treatment because they are 'governed by the same curriculum, the same conditions of service, the same national legislation and the same policies as all other public schools in the country' (Gardiner 2008, 7). A Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (MCRE) report echoes these observations, adding that the government manages and funds rural schools on 'the same principles and formulas as urban schools' (Department of Basic Education 2005, 2). However such approaches to curriculum and funding are tantamount to 'treating unequals as equals,' which potentially fuels inequality (Department of Basic Education, 2005, 13). Christie (2013) concludes that government policies mask ingrained patterns of spatial inequalities including the influence of rurality on educational provision and

achievement and on historical power-laden bureaucracies. 'These patterns in the production of space, (...) form the basis for the experiences of everyday life in schools in different places, and the inequalities that continue. '(Christie 2013, 781).

A desire to address the legacy of apartheid has influenced the architecture of the post-secondary education system in South Africa. Apart from the mandate to meet the skills demands in the economy and public sector, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) seeks to address the injustices that marred the education system during apartheid. A DHET stated objective is to create opportunities for social mobility for all South Africans. Student frustrations with the lack of transformation at universities resulted in a protest movement known as #FeesMustFall which spread across South Africa. Thousands of students protested against the lack of socio-economic transformation, called for the removal of colonial names and images on campuses, the decolonisation of curricula, and free education (Luescher, Loader, and Mugume 2017). The #FeesMustFall movement created opportunities for students and staff at universities to openly question curricula and approaches to teaching and learning as un-African and maintaining colonial legacies. The study reported in this paper is a contribution to these conversations.

Figured worlds and lived spaces

To understand the journeys from home to university and participation in university life, we employ the dual concepts of *transition* and *trajectory*. A *trajectory* implies a path or journey through a particular lifeworld and is often associated with becoming and changing identities (e.g. Barnett 1996). Despite its increasing prevalence in education research literature, there is no clear definition of what constitutes a transition (Ecclestone, Biesta, and Hughes 2010), but the word suggests a complex process of change that is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted (Gale and Parker 2014). Gale & Parker (2014, 737) define transition as 'the capability to navigate change' which suggests both agency and structure and developing the necessary practices and knowledges to succeed in a context. However, we also conceptualise transitions in spatial terms, as movement into and through space and time.

Space and spatiality are always implicated in the production of history (Massey 1992). In South Africa, there is a 'geography of race' (Gordon 2015), particularly for those living in rural communities who have been disproportionately affected by the displacement effects and continuing legacy of apartheid. Thus, space and time are dynamic and

mutually constitutive (Massey 1995). We are interested in the lived spaces, artefacts, practices and different knowledges that have shaped the histories of the students coming to university from rural contexts and the institutional, pedagogic and social spaces they encounter once they begin university life and how transitions are constituted across multiple spaces (Leander, Phillips, and Taylor 2010). A focus on space in the context of South Africa enables us to understand the historical and spatial production of inequalities in education (Christie 2013; Jacklin 2005). Following Leander, we understand transitions as movements towards and through spaces and pay attention to how the spatial and temporal configurations encountered open up or limit the possibilities for students from rural contexts and in what ways they reinforce or augment inequalities or offer creative alternatives and avenues.

Furthermore, a focus on space and topographies contributes to a broader understanding of the material, and of embodiment as central parts of the sociocultural tradition (Wertsch 1991; Daniels 2015). We take the notion of practice as our unit of analysis, seeing *practices* as ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding’ (Schatzki 2005, 11). Practices are not just sustained actions; they are culturally mediated in different material and bodily ways and are historically produced. For Schatzki (2012), practical understanding is shaped ‘by rules, teleology, and affectivity’. He explains ‘Teleology, as noted, is orientations toward ends, while affectivity is how things matter’ (Schatzki 2012, 59,60), thus practices are purposeful, governed by community rules and inflected with collective value. Holland & Lave (2009, 5) assert that ‘social practice theory emphasizes the historical production of persons in practice, and pays particular attention to differences among participants, and to the ongoing struggles that develop across activities around those differences.’ Recognising how *practices* are historically produced in persons is, we argue, important in a study of student transitions from rural contexts, particularly in South Africa. Through the notion of *practices*, we can interrogate the historical, cultural, relational, material and embodied meanings made and negotiated within and across lived spaces when students are moving from rural contexts and communities to universities.

Transitions within figured worlds

Moving between and through lifeworlds and the relationship these have with identity making and agency has been well theorised by Dorothy Holland and colleagues (1998)

through the theory of 'figured worlds.' Drawing on constructs from Bourdieu, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin, figured worlds acknowledge the societal structuring and positioning that shape our future selves and how a person's agency can help overcome such positionings. A *figured world* can be understood as 'a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others' (Holland et al. 1998, 52). Figured worlds are therefore social and cultural encounters in which the positions of those taking part matter, they are socially organised and located at particular times and places, for example, a rural community or a university can be considered a figured world. In this conceptualisation, identities are not fixed or pre-determined, as it is how we act when encountering new figured worlds, which shapes our identities. Holland et al. identify two forms of interacting identities. Figurative identities concern '*the stories, acts and characters that make the world a cultural world*' (Holland et al. 1998, 12), whereas positional identities concern '*day-to-day and on the ground relations of power, deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance – with the social-interactional, social-relational structures of the lived world*' (Holland et al. 1998, 127). The interplay of these two enable us to move beyond the social positioning and structures that reproduce inequalities and develop a new or reformed identity within a community, principally through employing our agency through actions designed to resist or overcome the cultural and historical constraints that powerful structures and positions embody, which they refer to as *improvisations* (Holland et al. 1998).

The idea of focusing on improvisations as a means for understanding how agency and structure relate to identities and positioning can be also linked to the notion of *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al. 1992), meaning the array of discourses and expectations encountered in different figured worlds and the adaptations students make in relation to access, participation and studying at university. Norton's (2010) concept of *investment* can also help to avoid a deficit positioning by focusing on how students *invest* in the funds of knowledge in rural communities, for example, investment in indigenous knowledges, languages and local practices. Similarly, it is important in analysing how students from rural backgrounds experience higher education and invest in the practices that shape their encounters with the university world, its knowledge domains, pedagogies, spaces, technologies, systems, and structures. In the following section, we will introduce the study, methodology, and methods employed.

Methodology

Our study investigated how students from rural backgrounds in South Africa negotiate the transition to HE and their trajectories through university once they arrive. Research questions focused on students' negotiations of the transitions from a rural home, school, and community, and how these negotiations influence their trajectories through higher education in Southern Africa. We investigated the practices that shape approaches to learning of students from rural areas in universities and the challenges they face in higher education curricula, which remain imbued with colonialism and the potential contribution and challenges of digital technologies and social media both in rural communities and when entering HE from a rural background. Fieldwork was conducted at three universities, all of which have students from rural contexts enrolled. The aim was to generate three rich case studies at these universities, and not to compare them per se. These were 'Urban', a 'comprehensive' university with a balanced focus on research, teaching, and technology, 'Town', a rural, research-led and 'previously advantaged' university, and 'Local,' a rural, teaching-led, 'previously disadvantaged' university.

In phase 1, a participatory methodology was employed, aiming for a decolonising approach that avoids a deficit positioning of under-represented students (Bozalek and Biersteker 2010; Smith 2012). The research derived from previous work in the UK (Timmis and Williams 2013; Timmis et al., 2016) and in South Africa (Rohleder and Thesen 2012; Leibowitz et al. 2012). Seventy-two second-year undergraduates from rural backgrounds were recruited as co-researchers, studying on either STEM or Humanities programmes, 64 continued throughout. The majority were born in South Africa with a few from neighbouring Southern African countries (Lesotho, Zimbabwe or Namibia).

Student co-researchers participated in seven face-to-face workshops over approximately nine months (April – Dec 2017), involving group discussions, drawing, mapping, and focus groups. They were each given an iPad, and created longitudinal, personal accounts and representations of everyday practices in their rural communities and in their university academic and social lives by collecting a series of digital artefacts using an App called Evernote (or in some cases Google Docs). Multimodal methods are helpful in reducing reliance on writing and language, especially in a Second Language (Rohleder and Thesen 2012). Co-researchers created notes, audio recordings, drawings, photographs and other artefacts, chosen by them to represent their lives. In the final part of the process, co-researchers produced composite digital narratives, combining

digital artefacts previously collected. Co-researchers, therefore, had a central role in the research and opportunities to shape it. Yet, we acknowledge that power relations in terms of researcher roles were still present (Heron and Reason 2001). Whilst we involved co-researchers as far as possible throughout, there were also practical limitations on involvement in data analysis, including time constraints and ethical issues in relation to the data of other co-researchers.

In phase 2 (April – May 2018), eight interviews were conducted with senior leaders and academics at all three universities. Interviews explored how institutions manage access, support under-represented students, and issues around rurality. Focus groups and academic interviews investigated support for students from rural areas, inclusivity and diversity within the curriculum and pedagogic practices. The findings from this phase are however not addressed directly in this paper.

The final qualitative data set includes over 108 discussion workshop transcripts and over 400 digital documentaries (collections of artefacts) and composite narratives created by co-researchers, eleven transcripts from interviews with senior leaders and academics and three academic focus group. The analysis was conducted inductively, multimodally, and theoretically. A thematic and multimodal analysis of each data type was first conducted, resulting in a total of 60 themes¹. Thematic analyses were further interrogated collaboratively through whole team sessions, including one with student co-researchers. These sessions allowed for deeper, theoretically informed, multi-layered interpretations of the accounts, drawings, and digital artefacts (Pink 2013). It is important to note that data analysis was not carried out comparatively. Instead, each data set is analysed in relation to the research questions.

Ethical thinking was central to the study, in particular in relation to the rights and responsibilities of all members of the team, including the co-researchers. Full ethics approvals were granted at all the universities involved. Co-researchers were asked for their consent at the outset in session one and then again in session seven where they were specifically asked for consent for sharing their data more widely (for example images and documentaries produced). Informed consent from senior leaders and academic staff was also obtained. We also co-developed a set of ethical principles with all members of the team, in particular, the co-researchers. For a more detailed discussion of the methodology and its potential for decolonising research, see Timmis, Mgqwashu and Naidoo (2019).

¹ Quotes and examples of data in this paper are drawn from and represent the relevant themes.

Transitions into and trajectories through the university

Findings discussed in this section come from the narratives produced by the 72 student co-researchers. This enabled a 'self-generated' understanding of how students' historic and current practices have contributed to the negotiation of transitions from rural contexts into and through higher education as they encounter different 'figured worlds' (Holland et al., 1998). Students' own accounts and discussions as co-researchers demonstrate how family and community, including religious groups, influenced their transitions into higher education and their journey through university. Through mapping the stated home locations, we found that co-researchers all came from Bantustans, the previously designated "homeland" areas during the apartheid period of South Africa². Most of these, can be referred to as tribal areas and are therefore amongst the most remote and disadvantaged parts of the country.

Reconciling family, community and university values

Taking cognisance of lived experiences of co-researchers who come from rural backgrounds and were transitioning into higher education was one of our central concerns. All of the co-researchers gave detailed accounts of their lives in rural areas and the importance of place and values. With reference to family and community, for example, one of the co-researchers points out that:

...in our communities when you respect somebody you don't respect them because they are older than you or they are younger than you, you respect them because it's what is expected of you. ... now the environment that we in is no longer (as) conducive (as) the environment we used to be in the rural areas...' (Discussion group, Urban, September 2017).

Digital documentaries and discussion group conversations also showed the tensions between what is taught at home and university:

... in the rural areas they teach you the values and you don't question it's yes and amen and no questioning but at varsity you taught the opposite, now how does that impact on you if I was told not to criticise them, I am here and then I'm told to criticise is it a conflict... (Discussion group, Local, September 2017, F.)

² Under Apartheid, "homelands" were areas designated (and required) for black communities to live in, in order to systematically remove them from urban areas. They were (and still are) situated in the most rural and impoverished parts the country.

Co-researchers see this socialisation into home literacies as disadvantaging and a source of confusion once at university, and universities seem not to appreciate this difference sufficiently:

I mean how do you find that, it's confusing to my head...think of a student who has lived with parents who are always encouraging that critique and questioning, and you've been taught never to question, and you are in the same class with this student who knows how to critique...' (Discussion group, Town, April 2017)

It is instances of this nature that create self-doubt, a low self-esteem, both of which can lead to learning difficulties. This is even more serious because co-researchers show that issues of self-esteem are often affected by home and school as well:

Students from rural areas lack confidence because teachers only promote low self-esteem... (Discussion group, Town, April 2017).

Prior to leaving the home, the 'world' occupied by co-researchers appears to be neat and easy to understand, and has very specific behavioural principles guiding their lives:

At home you are taught that if you are speaking to an adult, do not look them in the eye, so if they are talking to you and you look them straight in the eye, it's a form of disrespect (Discussion group, Town, April 2017).

Once at university, however, something quite different happens:

...and then when you get here it's just ... to the lecturers, when you don't look them in the eye it's like you are not listening to them or you just ... disrespectful ... and when you get home and then your uncle is talking and then you look them straight in the eye... 'You think you are clever now' (Discussion group, Town, April 2017).

Within their communities, this form of 'respect' extended to co-researchers' schooling environment as well, where teachers were both respected and feared:

...we respected teachers to the point that we feared, so it was hard to ask questions even if you didn't understand (Discussion group, Local, August, 2017).

The findings above shift our view of students from rural contexts in fundamental ways. Rather than a deficit construction of this group of students, equating lack of resources with disadvantage, the findings show how students utilised this prior collective experience and their own agency to move into new worlds:

...we found that we have a common thing ... we know rural areas that we were struggling ... in terms of resources, teachers and that thing of struggling made us to be able to read for ourselves, to be able to seek for information ... ((Discussion group, Town, April 2017).

A good work ethic, dedication, and commitment seem to emerge very strongly from co-researchers' narratives and their daily practices in rural communities, a disposition necessary to succeed in a university:

...you have to do things for yourself in the rural areas. I think that's one basic thing about us as children from rural areas.' In primary school, children had to clean the classrooms with cow dung and when it rained, they had to cover the holes with paper (Discussion group, Urban, May 2017, F.).

In cases where there was an absence of an educator for a particular subject during their schooling or where they struggled in terms of resources and subjects taught, co-researchers found ways to negotiate these challenges and working collectively, and this translated into coping with university life:

'In grade 12 there was no Physical Science teacher, so students studied the subject in groups in the evenings. We had to take responsibility for our own learning... Poor quality education ... lack of educational resources, did not stop us from teaching ourselves. (Discussion group, Town, May 2017, F.).

This section has shown some of the complexities and disjunctures in social values and practices in transitioning from a rural world to a university world, and how students made sense of their different positionings and improvised new ways of working and being (Holland et al. 1998; Kapp and Bangeni 2017). Students' identities were produced through their spatialised histories (Holland and Lave 2009), infused with the values constituted in historically produced, socially organised practices, in rural contexts. When transitioning to higher education, they encountered, not just new spaces and new practices, but alternative values, rules, orientations and affective responses (Schatzki 2012). Thus negotiating the new world of higher education is not just about making spatial or practice adjustments, it involves re-imagining or authoring the self and one's values (Holland et al. 1998).

Ubuntu, shared histories and belonging

The concept of Ubuntu seems to have had a big influence in shaping human relations in rural contexts and created an expectation of the same within the university context. Ubuntu is a communitarian philosophy based on the African idea of personhood, summarised in the expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – a person is a person through persons or 'I am because we are'. Co-researchers made frequent references to Ubuntu and its continuing importance in guiding how they live their lives.

... a sense of belonging or a sense of family in a community which is very much important where we come from ... (Discussion group, Urban, September 2017, M.).

For co-researchers, the desire for a "sense of belonging or a sense of family" was, in part, what Ubuntu meant for them. This suggests there was an expectation of its continuity from home into the university space and a desire for a relational experience of

university in line with Ubuntu. There were also expectations that the curriculum would reflect their backgrounds and cultural heritage. One of the co-researchers points out:

The elders know the seasons, when they need to start planting maize and peanuts – ‘it’s in their blood ... there is rich knowledge but it is not recorded. All this is important but ya, in all our stories it is not written somewhere ... It’s hard to write a book like that because as Xhosas you know that we are ... very different.....we have this rich knowledge where we come from which is ezilalini (village). So basically I’m looking forward to using that knowledge to ... make that knowledge be accommodated here because ... we can learn a lot from what we had...’ (Discussion group, Town, March 2017)

The rural community from which our student co-researchers come, as these findings show, is as much a learning environment as the university, and both can be considered as figured worlds.

While the findings indicate how co-researchers have brought many positive practices, values and skills from rural areas into university transitions, they also show the challenges they faced and how other people with the same background as well as societies available at university like religious groups helped them to cope with such challenges, as shown below:

Transitioning to university life socially wasn’t that easy, but it was much simpler than the academic life because I stayed in res[idence], and I got people or friends that are almost from the same background as me so they understood what I was about and where I was from ... we were there for each other ... (Discussion group, Town, July 2017).

Such friendships and relationships went beyond racial lines as well and were often connected to particular places:

... and then making other friends except from them and then meeting different people from different races also so ya I think socially it was easier to transition into university life than academically and even going to the dining hall it was my first time eating at a place where there is a lot of people ... (Discussion group, Town, July 2017).

Co-researchers frequently identified how they maintained aspects of their rural lives through societies and social relationships within the university and the importance of these for transitions into and once at university, as this quote shows:

... Church, music/choir, school, community and the diverse cultures in my society have played a huge impact in the way I adjusted in University and the way I have dealt with issues such as being homesick ... (Discussion group, Urban, August 2017).

The findings above show how shared histories and cultures contributed to developing new modes of belonging (Thomas 2012; Lave and Wenger 2005) and the importance of seeking common ground when engaged in the everyday ‘enduring struggles’ and ‘contentious local practice’ (Holland and Lave 2009, 2) in the new world of higher

education. These accounts of transitions also highlight the significance of place and personal meaning making in developing new practices and practical understandings (Schatzki 2012; Holland et al. 1998) and signal the need for universities to acknowledge the extent to which prior experience, history and place will shape university experiences.

Agency and improvisations

While there are challenges expressed, co-researchers have referred to the resources they bring from home and their agency to overcome positions of power and improvise new ways of being and epistemic becoming:

On Friday we usually do our pracs ... we are divided into groups ... first-year laboratory for chemistry ... it was about desalination ... it's not that easy for us when it comes to pracs because like a lot of things we just came across them here, we were never exposed into laboratories at high school ... (Discussion group, Town, August 2017).

There is evidence from the data that indigenous knowledge is often helpful, though often overlooked in the university:

We had to assess the soil ... but I was familiar with that thing because before at home you know when it's planting season, before we plant we crop rotate ... assess the soil if it is good to plant spinach ... actually our professor he was impressed, like he loved it (Discussion group, Town, August 2017).

Home chores seem to have developed time management skills for co-researchers that are necessary for university education:

'Yes also you don't get time to go to the school because you know you have a lot of responsibilities when you get home, so you don't get time to go to other places you know that you go home and then you work for yourself, ya' (Discussion group, Urban, May 2017).

Working in groups and with others in pursuit of an academic project seems not to be much of a challenge either for co-researchers:

We learnt how to work with others through playing games in rural areas and it made it easier to work in teams at university.... you come to university you now know how to work with people ... (Discussion group, Local, June 2017,).

One aspect of exercising agency took the form of more critical engagement with the cultural dissonance and ambivalence experienced in negotiating rural to university transitions. Whilst there were many survivalist or victory narratives, where having 'made it' was paramount, there were also examples of the acknowledgement of the conflicting positionings of both rural and urban identities:

Transition from a rural life to an urban institution has its pros and cons. The challenges are not easy to overcome but I'm neither a failure nor a quitter. Adapting to the changes mean changing my lifestyle - that is close to impossible. There is a Xhosa saying that goes "ungamkhupha umntu ezilalini kodwa awunakuzikhupha iilali emntwini". This means that even though I'm no longer in the rurals the values I got there can never be erased (Discussion group, Town, July 2017).

For some co-researchers, transitioning to university could be perceived as a systemic challenge, involving institutional cultures that privilege the already privileged. The quote below expresses such sentiments. We suggest that examples such as this demonstrate critical thinking, which HEIs often assume students from rural contexts do not have, and offers an example of misrecognition (Fraser 2003).

The education system here purposely or otherwise favours those who grew up in such privileged lifestyles, and that is of great disadvantage to rural students because we are treated as if we all come from the same backgrounds and live the same life ... We are treated as if we are from the same privileged schools that prepare their students well for tertiary education ... I see this as a reason why many students from rural disadvantaged backgrounds ... have difficulties in completing their tertiary education... (Discussion group, Local, August 2017).

It is the failure to acknowledge the backgrounds and associated funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992) that students from rural communities can contribute. They are being misrecognized. Figured worlds act as sites of possibility and becoming, but are always mediated by relations of power (Urrieta 2007). Students in our study used their agency and funds of knowledge to overcome (some of) the historical power positionings and misrecognition that they faced in higher education as part of a process of epistemic becoming (Holland et al. 1998; Fataar and Fillies 2016).

Discussion

These findings illuminate the nature of transitions between different worlds and trajectories through lifeworlds, and the relationship these have with identity making and agency, and the ways in which curricular needs to consider this aspect. Through their encounters with different figured worlds over time, co-researchers' accounts reveal the extent to which they gain new and/or changing identities 'through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organisation of those worlds' activity' (Holland et al., 1998, 41). The seemingly simple, routine practice of respecting elders within a rural context, for example, appears to be the source of anxiety in relation to university. This exemplifies Schatzki's (2005) take on practices as embodied and materially mediated activities that build on shared understandings. The emphasis on embodiment and material mediation are important in highlighting that practices in rural

contexts are not just actions, but are culturally mediated in different material and bodily ways, drawing on spatialised, historical funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992). So while a simple cultural principle of greeting a fellow human being is a 'natural' act understood and appreciated by all in rural communities, it is not so in a university context. The 'meaning' students from rural contexts associate with greeting is 'put to the test' and creates a sense of self-doubt, a state not conducive for learning..

Co-researchers showed awareness and a willingness to adapt to university cultures and context. There is an appreciation of the 'world' they have since become part of. Thus, our argument is not to say the identities engendered in the rural worlds are fixed, and thus need to be left intact. Instead of seeing identity in essentialist terms, we consider identity dynamically as the 'self in practice' (Holland et al. 1998, 31). They also argue that the interplay of figurative and positional identities helps overcome the social positioning and structures that reproduce inequalities and develop new or reformed identities within a community. In our study, co-researchers brought their rural identities into university spaces and the process of making sense of these disparate identities and their personal histories and the practices associated with them, contributed to how they figured their future selves (Holland and Lave 2009). The strong sense of responsibility, and therefore agency that students reported in relation to practices and roles they took on in their homes and rural communities, seem not to have always worked in the process of transition. This is not to say that co-researchers were always accepting about the roles and tasks of daily life in rural settings, or that they always recognised the agency it afforded them. Instead, these practices were regular and anticipated. However, once at university, they expressed their alarm at not knowing what was expected of them, how to belong, and how to navigate the culture.

Co-researchers frequently referred to Ubuntu and the desire for a "sense of belonging", which suggested expectations of its continuity from home into university, and cultures of belonging have been recognised as a factor in academic success and retention (Thomas 2012). Indeed, our findings show that negotiating transitions is always a matter of becoming and therefore changing subjectivities (Holland and Lave 2009; Holland et al. 1998). This was challenging for the co-researchers in our study as they tried to develop hybrid identities that brought their rural identities into dialogue with new identities negotiated in the figured world of university. This could be considered a form of 'intercultural translation' between different worlds and different bodies of knowledge (de Sousa Santos 2014).

Conclusions

The effort universities need to put in to avoid mis-recognising the cultural world students from rural contexts bring into higher education is a key concern for this paper. Knowing who our students are and valuing the knowledge and experience they bring into the university space, as our findings show, is crucial when transitioning into new ways of learning and teaching, and the relationships forged between lecturers and students in lecture halls and other university spaces.

Another contributing factor in this transition is the process of negotiating, resisting and challenging the norms of university spaces and practices that have contributed to students' epistemic becoming (Fataar 2018). This is not to say that students from rural backgrounds have not struggled for their epistemic contributions, or that there is no value in such struggles. However, as discussed earlier, policy and research on transitions, not just in South Africa, but internationally, tends to focus on the managerial problems of retention and success, rather than understanding the contributions that students from under-represented backgrounds can bring to higher education. There is thus an urgent need for university practices, values and norms to acknowledge and incorporate all students' prior experiences and histories. As universities, we can no longer conceptualise students as coming from decontextualized, ahistorical contexts. Instead, university practices, values and norms need to acknowledge and incorporate all students' prior experiences and histories. This, we argue, is central to fostering a relational approach to success and retention through students' own agency and sense of belonging.

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