

# “Doing Just Enough to Get By”: Voices of Black Women Early Career Academics on Navigating the Publish or Perish Discourse in South Africa

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## Abstract

In this article, we focus on the narratives of black women early career academics (ECAs) who are confronting and negotiating the “publish or perish” discourse in their professional lives in the university. Through a qualitative interpretivist case study, we purposively recruited and interviewed 10 education academics in one research-intensive university in South Africa. We relied on Nancy Fraser’s social justice framework to think through and to theorise the complex positionality of black women academics in a South African university. The findings reveal that black women ECAs often have challenges when it comes to research and publication, with some of the participants rejecting the publish or perish mantra, questioning the usefulness of publishing, and to what extent their own research will make a societal impact. The findings also reveal the deeply embedded patriarchal and gendered nature of the publish or perish discourse in how it disregards the role of wife/motherly/societal care work that women academics often perform. We end the article with broader reflections on the emergence of the publish and perish discourse in the South African higher education system and its implications for the attraction, retention, and wellbeing of black women ECAs in the sector.

**Keywords:** publish or perish; higher education; early career academic; transformation; neoliberalism



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## Introduction

The word itself, “research”, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized people. (Smith 2013, 1)

[W]hen you can measure what you are speaking about and express it in numbers you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind. (Van Dalen 2021, 1676)

The Aotearoa intellectual Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes about research being inherently a “dirty” word, one that is deeply implicated in the epistemic, ontological and methodological ownership and colonisation of indigenous communities. Research and researching were instrumental in the project of dehumanising and subjugating the indigenous communities, or what the postcolonial philosopher Aime Césaire ([1955] 2005, 42) calls the “thingification” of black people. For Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, hyphenating the word research as “re-search” begins to reveal and explicate how research is not an innocent, apolitical or neutral process (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Van Dalen suggests that knowledge is only valid, recognised and legitimate when it is quantifiable, measurable and can be expressed in clear numbers. The “publish or perish” discourse is firmly rooted in this logic, in how numbers matter. And the more one publishes, the more one is seen as possessing scholarly authority, knowledge and specialisation in a field. The dangers with this logic, and we expand on this later in the article, are that this discourse 1) collapses knowledge to numbers, 2) reinforces the flawed assumption that quantity matters more than quality, and finally 3) has mental health implications for those who are not able to “play the numbers game”.

In higher education, academics are expected to re-search and publish as part of their roles and responsibilities. The idea behind this focus is that academics ought to be playing a significant role in the production and dissemination of public knowledge in society, and in the process, providing critical skills and expertise for our globalised knowledge economy. Kelvin, as cited in Van Dalen (2021), reveals the operational functions of this discourse, which is rooted in the flawed belief that numbers matter, and the greater the number of publications one produces, the more legitimate one is as an academic. Academics are forced to play the research and publication game, where the greater the number of publications one produces, the greater the chances and likelihood of institutional recognition/rewards/validations, through tenure, promotions, awards and grants. This publication game is part and parcel of that discourse, where higher education has become a “factory production” of research, with little regard for the quality of the outputs or their potential impact on the scholarly field and society. Thus, we play the neoliberal game.

The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama (2022) writes that scholars often make the mistake of thinking that neoliberalism is a synonym for capitalism (Fukuyama 2022, 19). For Fukuyama, neoliberalism refers to that school of thought associated with economists such as Milton Friedman, Gary Becker, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, among others, whose ideas offered a perfect ideological apparatus for the deregulation and privatisation of then centre-right Reagan and Thatcher administrations in the United States and United Kingdom. In higher education terms, and we expand on this later in the article, we begin to see the gradual cutting of funding and subsidy, with institutions of higher learning being forced to compete in the marketplace for funders, donors, and resources that could make them “efficient”, “competitive” and “attractive”. This manifests in the introduction of performance management regimes through performance reviews, the counting of productivity units, rankings, ratings, and other neoliberal instruments meant to drive research productivity, funding and student throughput. This is often done through a focus on the quantity of the outputs and the subsidy they bring rather than the quality of the research and its impact.

Although there is a plethora of literature on the publish or perish discourse and its effects on higher education, little is available in the field on the complex and challenging narratives of black women early career academics (hereafter referred to as ECAs) and how they grapple with and negotiate this challenge in their professional lives. In this article, we attempt to make a contribution to this literature through foregrounding the narratives/stories/experiences of black women ECAs and their quest in navigating the pitfalls of the publish or perish discourse in their academic lives.

We now turn to the contested context in South African higher education.

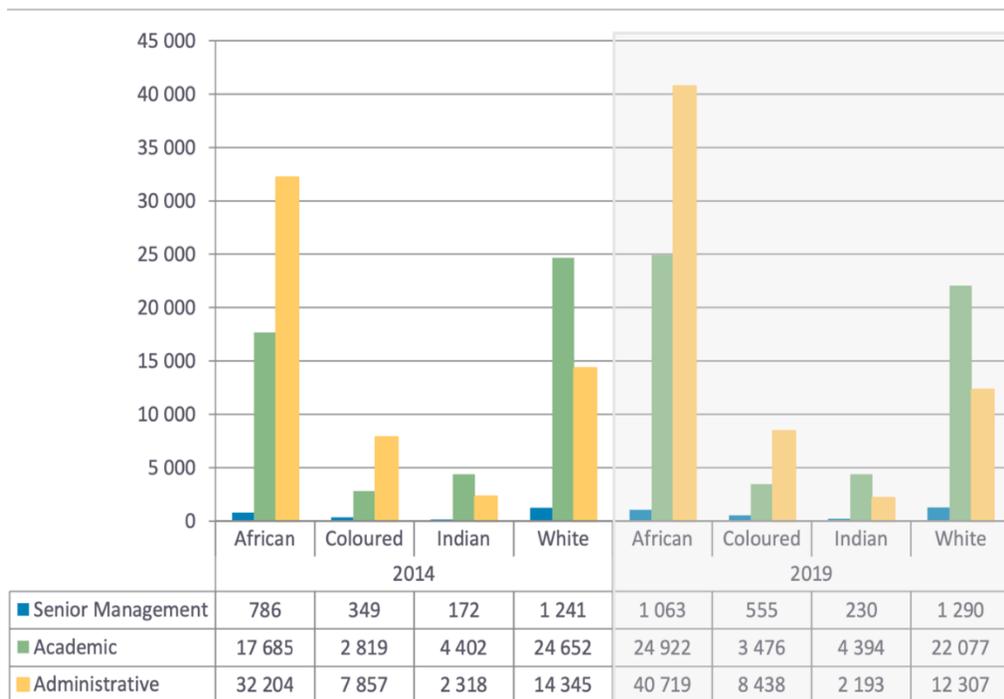
## South African Higher Education in Context

South Africa is a relatively new and emerging democracy, still reeling from the haunting and damaging structural legacies of colonialism and apartheid in the country (Akoojee and Nkomo 2007; Booï, Vincent, and Liccardo 2017; Gibson 2015). Higher education was deeply instrumental in the apartheid regime’s racist ideology of seeing black people as subhuman, inferior and only useful as a labour reserve for the needs of the then white economy. It is against this background that in the early 1990s the incoming democratic government led by the African National Congress (ANC) faced a myriad challenges, one of them being the urgent and paramount task of transforming the higher education sector and ensuring that it becomes inclusive, democratic and representative of the black majority (Badat 1994, 2004, 2008). There remain tensions between what is envisioned and articulated in the policy and legislative frameworks such as the *Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education: Education White Paper 3* (Department of Education [DoE] 1997) (hereafter White Paper 3), Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (RSA 1997), the *Draft National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa* (DoE 2001) (hereafter the National Plan), the *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in South Africa’s Public Higher Education Institutions* (DoE 2008) (hereafter the Soudien

Report) and others. These policy and legislative frameworks 1) correctly diagnose the structural challenges that are facing the sector in greater detail, and 2) provide the pathway for what is to be done to pursue measures to redress the historical injustices of the past. Scholars such as Heleta (2016), Mbembe (2016) and Kumalo (2021) argue that South Africa remains a colonial outpost, whose universities, knowledge, curricula, teaching and learning practices, and hegemonic institutional cultures are designed to produce, maintain and reproduce Euro-American modernity, with few results being shown of any meaningful efforts to transform/Africanise/decolonise the sector.

Although the above-mentioned policy and legislative documents do mention the importance of ECAs as part of the broader project of reaching “race” and gender equity targets for transformation, it was only in 2011 that the Higher Education South Africa (HESA) task team produced the “Proposal for a National Programme to Develop the Next Generation of Academics for South African Higher Education” (DHET 2015), calling for the creation of the Staffing South Africa’s Universities Framework (SSAUF) in focusing on the size, composition and wellbeing of academic staff members.

From 2014–2019, the number of African academics in higher education increased from 64 996 to about 91 898 (VitalStats 2020), while there were 65 906 male academics in 2014 compared to about 74 206 women academics. By 2019 there were about 88 108 women academics compared to about 74 754 male academics. Looking more closely into the ECA experience, the table below begins to reveal the larger picture of where the majority of ECAs are languishing in the higher education system.



**Table 1:** A headcount of staff in selected personnel categories by “race” for 2014 and 2019 (VitalStats 2020, 43)

In the table above, we begin to see that it is the ECAs who constitute the majority of the academic labour force in South African higher education, with black African academics increasing by about 7 237 over the five-year reporting period. Furthermore, these academics are trapped in employment precarity and insecurity, with about 97 944 of them being employed on a temporary basis, often stuck for years in part-time jobs (VitalStats 2020, 41). The research participants’ voices/narratives/experiences in this article on navigating and negotiating the publish or perish discourse need to be understood in that broad context.

Nyoni and Agbaje (2022), Khunou et al. (2019), Ramahai (2019) and Mkhize (2022) complicate the above narrative in revealing the crippling structural challenges that black women academics often face in an alienating and deeply colonising institutional culture. For Mkhize, disciplinary fields such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) continue to reform (instead of transforming), with black women facing oppression based on their racial and gender identities. In another paper Hlatshwayo (2020), one of the authors of this article draws on both intersectionality and Nat Nakasa’s concept of “natives of nowhere” to theorise the precarious nature that black students and black academics continue to face in the public university, with issues of marginality, alienation, epistemic violence and an outdated curriculum all pushing them to the periphery of higher education.

We now turn to offering brief comments on the publish or perish discourse in higher education.

### Publish or Perish: The Numbers Game

The focus on the publish or perish discourse and its (potential) implications for academia is not a new phenomenon in higher education (see, for example, Maistry 2019; Miller, Taylor, and Bedeian 2011; Wadesango 2014). Since at least the early 1920s, researchers have been attempting to make sense of higher education's overemphasis on research often at the expense of community engagement, teaching and learning, and the need to create a critical citizenry. This reflects the pervasive and harsh institutional culture(s) in higher education, in which academics are forced at all costs, and despite the effects on their mental wellbeing and scholarly standing, to publish or perish. As mentioned earlier, the publish or perish discourse emerges from performance management regimes that introduce various corporate and neoliberal logics such as "quality assurance", "productivity" and "efficiency" in the academy (Amutuhaire 2022), all providing quantifiable measurables that one must achieve or else one is deemed to be failing and struggling as an academic. These neoliberal ideas had their prominence particularly in the 1970s and 1980s with the then systemic reforms in the public sector when institutions of higher learning were losing their government funding in the global North and were forced to be "efficient" and to fend for themselves (Hlatshwayo 2022; Shore 2010).

Shore (2010) argues that two trends are responsible for neoliberalism in higher education; firstly, higher education in the global North was experiencing massification while at the same time government subsidy per student was drastically declining. Secondly, there was a shift in the public imagination at the time where higher education ceased to be a public good, necessary for the growth and development of a society, and began to be seen as an individual, personal investment in one's own future. Similarly, we also saw a corresponding change in the public discourse in how the role and function of higher education were no longer about focusing on critical enquiry but now needed to respond to the scarce skills that were required by the marketplace and its corporate interests.

We should note that the publish or perish discourse is inherently inconsistent by its own metrics. This is seen in how some scholars do publish and yet somehow still *perish* in the academy. For example, globally, governments have been cutting the national budgets for higher education, resulting in large numbers of academics losing their jobs, as witnessed in the United Kingdom, Australia, Pakistan and in other countries (Corbera et al. 2020; Mumtaz, Saqulain, and Mumtaz 2021). In Australia alone, nearly 12 500 academics have lost their jobs, with nearly half of them being casual employees (see Zhou 2020). This means that 10% of about 130 000 academic employees have now lost their jobs in the country (Zhou 2020). Publishing, being "productive" and playing the numbers game, does not necessarily guarantee employment in an increasingly precarious, Covid/post-Covid higher education sector.

The neoliberal obsession with the public or perish discourse has socially constructed the *false* tension in higher education, with research being seen to have much more currency and value than teaching and learning, and community engagement. The implications of this phenomenon in South Africa are that some academics refuse to engage in teaching and learning, and they choose to focus on research and publications as that is where the real “institutional dividends” and incentives are. This has resulted in ECAs increasingly feeling overwhelmed, overburdened, and overextended with what the literature deems an unreasonable workload (Price, Coffey, and Nethery 2015; Remmik et al. 2011; Vohlídalová 2021). Bourabain (2021) writes about the “smokescreen” of equality in the academy that includes everyday cloning, the façade of support that is given to women EACs, as well as the patronisation and paternalism that they have to negotiate. For Bourabain, this broadly reflects the macro-contextual power dynamics revealing themselves through the moments of the everyday, where institutions have codified diversity and inclusion policies, yet on the ground, racism, sexism, and discrimination remain crippling problems.

In navigating the pitfalls of the publish or perish discourse, ECAs have formed what French philosopher Michel Foucault has termed “regimes of truth” in their lives (Lorenzini 2016), in socially constructing alternative modes of being and belonging for themselves in higher education. This includes the communities of practice where ECAs help, mentor, teach and train one another in the art of publishing through critical friendships and peer support (see Mbatha et al. 2020). Other ECAs have formed social capital networks, or what Miller (2014) calls the “knowledge ecosystem”, that are designed to create knowledge, engage in mutually supportive relationships, and help one another in career development and strategic compliance with managerialism (Aprile, Ellem, and Lole 2021). This, for Aprile, Ellem and Lole (2021), reveals the agency and autonomy that ECAs have in obtaining satisfaction and academic integrity with their work while at the same time fulfilling the neoliberal requirements.

Herndon (2016) suggests that playing the numbers game socially constructs and incentivises research and scholarly fraud in higher education, with academics resorting to plagiarism/self-plagiarism, data fabrication, stealing students’ work, manipulating the data, creating fake reviewers and other unethical practices. In a deeply existential and self-reflexive paper, Maistry (2019) reflects on his own experiences of publishing in a predatory journal, and the personal/academic/scholarly cost of taking part in academic dishonesty. Maistry writes:

I want to declare upfront and without condition, my assumption of full responsibility for the choices I made in the period 2012 to 2014, a period in which I published five articles with Kamla-Raj Enterprises (KRE)—a publisher that has been identified as a predatory publisher. While the ensuing discussion illuminates the circumstances under which this occurred, I do not for one moment exonerate myself from blame or responsibility. I am acutely aware of the ludicrousness of claiming, as [an] academic, blissful oblivion or naivety. I contend that a naive and ignorant academic sounds, and is, oxymoronic to say

the least. ... I must admit that I blindly fell into this neoliberal trap, the consequences of which have been dire indeed. (Maistry 2019, 5–6)

While we agree with Maistry's confession and existential reflections on playing the numbers game and taking part in the neoliberal publish or perish discourse, we nonetheless argue that the rise of the neoliberal logic and its performative discourses in higher education have socially constructed this kind of unethical environment where academics are to take part in such fraudulent schemes in order to negotiate their survival in the university. While we as academics have the (academic) freedom, intellectual autonomy and choice to resist and to not play this game, the consequences of not publishing and not reaching the targeted numbers can ensure that one's growth and journey in the academy are derailed, or potentially frustrated.

Malaika wa Azania (2020), Zondi (2021) and Kumalo (2021) have offered a scathing critique of the neoliberal university in South Africa, and the epistemic, ontological, and methodological oppressions it brings. For wa Azania (2020), historically white universities have become "slaughterhouses" where black bodies go to die, with few prospects for survival. Kumalo (2021), focusing on what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) calls epistemic freedom, argues for re-centring the black archive and other marginalised African knowledge systems in curricula as a solution to the threat of epistemicide. In their groundbreaking work, Boughey and McKenna (2021) caution about the dangers of what they term the "decontextualised learners" approaches to education, where instead of dealing with the political, social, and structural challenges that students are facing in higher education, academics tend to provide "piecemeal" approaches. These include prescribing literacy skills, computer training, language practice, skills development, and others that often ignore the political nature of the South African classroom.

We now turn to the theoretical perspectives of the article.

### Fraser's Social Justice Framework

The American philosopher and critical theorist Nancy Fraser argues that justice needs to be philosophically and empirically understood as parity of participation in society (Fraser 2000, 2009a, 2009b). This refers to the central idea that citizens need to participate on equal footing, that is, as full and equal partners in society. This constitutes a radical conception of justice, where justice becomes real and meaningful *only* when everyone is able to successfully participate as equals. For Fraser, the obstacles that individuals face in society often operate at the economic level, at the cultural level, and later on, she adds the political level to her framework (Fraser 2009a). At the economic level, this is where we begin to see citizens are not able to fully participate in society because of a lack of access to much-needed resources. This results in what could be seen as distributive injustice or maladministration. In higher education terms, the emergence of the #FeesMustFall national protests in 2015/2016 in South African higher education represents a significant epistemic break in the status quo, with students (and academics)

correctly arguing that higher education has become elitist, unaffordable and anti-poor (Booyesen 2016; Habib 2019; Langa 2017). Fraser suggests that another form of structural obstacle that prevents participatory parity in society is at the cultural level, where emergent institutionalised and hierarchicalised hegemonic cultural values often render some as “space invaders” (Puwar 2004, 1–2). This results in the misrecognition where citizens become subalterns and subjects who cannot speak and enunciate. This is perhaps best captured in Khunou et al.’s (2019) “Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience”, in which they argue that historically white universities have rendered black academics as the “pariahs” of the academy who are deemed incompetent, angry and out of place.

Fraser adds the third political dimension in her later work to call attention to the various ways in which the post-Westphalian conception of the nation state has become largely limited in helping academics understand the transnational and neoliberal challenges facing the world (Bozalek, Hölscher, and Zembylas 2020). Put differently, the rise of neoliberal capitalism has produced different sets of challenges that cannot be purely resolved at a nation-state level. The political, economic, cultural, ecological, and technological challenges, among others, that the global community is facing need to be thought out in such translational, intersectional and international frameworks.

In this article, we rely on Fraser’s complex conceptions of social justice as participatory parity to think through and to theorise the experiences of black women ECAs on how they navigate and negotiate the publish or perish discourse in their professional lives.

We now turn to the methodological decisions of the article.

## Methodological Decisions

In this article, we relied on a qualitative interpretivist case study to explore and to theorise women academics’ experiences of the publish or perish phenomenon in their professional lives (Bogdan and Biklen 1982; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Creswell and Creswell 2017). We were largely drawn to the interpretivist paradigm because of its focus on the complex, subjective, nuanced and contradictory experiences of research participants as they struggle to make sense of their own realities. We were interested in exploring black women ECAs and their multiple truths as they navigate the challenges of the publish or perish discourse.

We purposively recruited 10 black women ECAs who were all working in the School of Education in a research-intensive university. Of the 10 participants who took part in the study, eight were black Africans, one was coloured and another was Indian. In terms of the qualification of the ECAs, nine of them held doctoral qualifications, with one possessing a Master’s degree and nearing completion of her PhD thesis at the time of data generation for this article. The disciplinary backgrounds of the participants were diverse: three of the participants came from curriculum studies, with each of the other participants coming from geography education, tourism education, maths and science

education, gender education, teacher development studies, educational sciences, and early childhood development. All the research participants had possessed their doctoral qualification for less than five years at the time of data generation, with the other research participant who possessed a Master's degree being a novice scholar who had joined the university less than a year before the time of data generation.

While there is significant literature on the importance of “student voices” as a conceptual framework in educational research and the relationship between voice and agency (see, for example, Cook-Sather 2020; Müller-Kuhn et al. 2021; Welton Mansfield and Salisbury 2022), little is available in the literature on “academic voices” as an analytical or theoretical tool. Our understanding of “academic voice” in this article similarly centres on shining a spotlight on the hidden narratives/stories/experiences of black women ECAs and how they navigate and grapple with the publish or perish discourse in academia.

ECAs tend to be a complex group of scholars who have different employment focus areas (some only research, others only teaching, others do both, including supervision), but they are generally novice academics who are relatively inexperienced in higher education (Hollywood et al. 2020). The literature suggests that they are often overworked, overwhelmed, exploited and isolated. Some ECAs lament a lack of institutional support that leads to some leaving academia (Hollywood et al. 2020; Msimanga 2014; Spina et al. 2022). Through the use of semi-structured interviews ranging between 45 minutes to an hour, we were able to explore the complex narratives of black women ECAs on their writing, publishing and being expected to be “productive” even though they are relatively novice scholars. The data was coded and analysed in two ways. Firstly, we adopted a thematic analysis where we wanted to allow the data to “speak for itself” without imposing the theory. This allowed us to have a deeper understanding of the rich data, and to see the raw themes. Secondly, we drew on Fraser's social justice framework to abstract and to theorise the findings, seeing the issues of power, inequality, maladministration, misrecognition, misframing, and neoliberal pressures. This approach allowed us to have a fuller appreciation of the data, and to move beyond a descriptive analysis of the findings and discussions.

This article forms part of a much larger institutional culture research project that focuses on the different aspects of transformation and decolonisation in South African higher education. Through this project, we have sought and obtained the ethical clearance as well as gatekeeper permissions from the university. In addition, we obtained consent from the research participants both in writing and through digital audio recordings, with additional member checking being offered on all the interviews that were conducted with them. This was primarily done to ensure that what was captured in the transcribing process did reflect their voices/views/narratives.

We now turn to the findings of the article.

## The Findings and Discussion

There were two major themes that emerged prominently in the data when it comes to how black women ECAs navigate and negotiate the publish or perish discourse in their lives: 1) the love/hate relationship that they have with research, and 2) the gendered and patriarchal nature of the publish or perish discourse.

The participants had a complex relationship with the publish or perish discourse. Most of the research participants preferred teaching and learning over research and publishing, with some ECAs lamenting that “I don’t like teaching”, and others confessing that they are not researchers at all. Zinhle, below, argues that her response to the publish or perish mantra is one of hatred and annoyance with the university’s promotion of the publishing culture for financial reasons:

I don’t like researching and publishing. I like teaching and learning. I like teaching students. I’m not a researcher. I do it because it’s a requirement because the university wants to generate money; and for them to get more money, we need to publish. But I hate researching and publishing but because in performance management, it is needed. I must be seen to be doing it. I don’t like writing, writing for what? To write something that no one reads about ... You may say knowledge is contested but the publications are not read by anyone. It is only you who is writing for them and your reviewers and students. No one is reading that .... In academia I came in through the window. So in research, I didn’t have, or I am not that into publishing because I think it is more challenging ... I hate that. I don’t like it. (Zinhle)

Drosou et al. (2020) argue that a combination of personal, interpersonal and structural issues is often at play when it comes to ECAs’ rejection, fears, insecurities, and self-doubt around publishing. This is further compounded by the fear of writing as well as potential language barriers for those who are not native speakers of English. They suggest that various targeted interventionist methods such as writing groups and participatory workshops play a significant role in alleviating some of these concerns that ECAs, such as Zinhle, may have. Scholars such as Osbaldiston, Cannizzo, and Mauri (2019) and Hollywood et al. (2020) have revealed the workload management tensions that ECAs often confront between teaching and learning and research, and the struggle to balance the two. Another research participant, Thabiso, says that she only does the minimum, and if she publishes two journal articles per year it is a “bonus” for her. She comments that the publish or perish discourse does not really apply to her as she is not interested in being a professor. Using words such as “minimum requirements”, “crazy” and “stressing”, she narrates that her approach to the publish or perish discourse is one of “strategic compliance” with performance management instruments. She does what is institutionally expected at a lecturer level, nothing more, nothing less:

I do meet the minimum requirements of publishing, at least at lecturer level it is one paper a year. If I do two, it is a bonus. So, but I’m just meeting the minimum requirements of the job ... but I don’t stress myself to stretch over and do more because I will go crazy, and it also depends. People will stretch more if you want to be a

professor. You've got to have many publications and things. I think I'm not part of and I'm not much interested in that due to my other personal life that is focused on something else. I make sure I meet all the minimum requirements of my job. I just feel good with that. (Thabiso)

One can argue that the emergent narratives from some black ECAs about their apparent rejection of the publish or perish discourse could be reflective of a number of complexities in higher education. Firstly, it could reflect the growing sense of disillusionment among academics in general and ECAs in particular on the need to rethink the publish or perish discourse and how dangerous it could be to their personal and academic lives. Put differently, academics could be seeing that the publish or perish phenomenon is inherently neoliberal and damaging to their mental wellbeing, with Van Hilten and Ruel (2022), Hollywood et al. (2020) and Osbaldiston, Cannizzo and Mauri (2019) revealing the isolation, depression and marginality that both senior/tenured academics and junior scholars experience in being forced to navigate the pressures of constantly publishing in what are considered the "top quality" journals. Secondly, the seeming rejection of the publish or perish discourse could potentially be indicative of the complexities in the identities of the academics, with some academics seeing themselves as teachers who are passionate about teaching and learning in the classroom, while others see themselves as scholars who are interested in knowledge production.

Writing about their challenges as black ECAs struggling with the demands of publishing, teaching and community engagement, Mbatha et al. (2020) suggest that they have observed the academic diversity among their colleagues in a research intensive university. They write that they have witnessed "seasoned academics excelling in meeting their KPAs [key performance indicators], while others rejected them, arguing that they identify themselves as dissertation supervisors and teachers, not researchers who publish" (see Mbatha et al. 2020, 33). While this conception of the diversity and ontological/epistemological differences among academics could potentially help explain why ECAs such as Zinhle and Thabiso appear to reject the publish or perish mantra with its obsession with research outputs, McKinley et al. (2021) disagree and do not find the distinction between teaching and research helpful. They argue that the nexus between research and teaching is complex, multidimensional, and that insisting on thinking of the two as separate activities only reinforces narrow and individualistic/neoliberal demands of performance management. We are persuaded by McKinley et al.'s (2021) argument because we believe that "excellent teachers", or at least *impactful* teachers, tend to be those who are on the cutting edge of the scholarship of teaching and learning, and who know and appreciate the creative and innovative pedagogical approaches that are suitable to the kind of student that is in front of them (see De Courcy 2015; Gourlay and Stevenson 2017; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019). Separating teaching and research, as commented on by Mbatha et al. (2020) and as suggested by both Zinhle and Thabiso earlier, may not necessarily be helpful to the holistic growth and development of ECAs and their journey in higher education.

For another black ECA, Bontle, the publish or perish discourse is a gendered and patriarchal agenda that inherently serves male colleagues who are largely not burdened by needing to balance the academic labour and family responsibilities that come with being a mother and a wife. Magoqwana, Maqabuka, and Tshoedi (2019) call on us to reflect on what they call “invisible labour”, that is, the un-seen/un-recognised/un-appreciated/un-valued work that women academics often have to take on and its effects on their lives, progress, promotion and academic wellbeing. Bontle feels that publishing in general is not possible for her as a woman academic who has a number of roles that she plays in her life and expected responsibilities that she has to confront and negotiate every day:

The publishing part for me it's too much, it's a bit too much! The research part I feel you know; I am not saying the females aren't good at it. Listen to me very carefully so I'm not saying that they are not good at it. But I feel that the research part of being an academic was mostly made or introduced for the males. Because I am a daughter, a wife, I am mother, I've got to focus on and they got their own focal/focus area ... For us it is different; we have different roles that I need to play so it becomes very difficult for us to be able to publish. We really don't have the time. For them [males], do you know that they can go to campus, sleep in their offices and not go home. And it would be acceptable. But in my case, I've got a five-year-old son, so imagine my five-year-old sleeping alone. He won't be able to do that but for him home is home because mom is there and when mom is not at home, that's not a home. Yes, even the husband too, when he comes, he is going to feel or want to feel that warmly, knowing that his wife is home. (Bontle)

It should be noted that some ECAs who took part in the study did enjoy the challenges of the publish or perish discourse, and the institutional demands on research productivity, often at the expense of teaching and learning. Ntando comments on her love for research, and her efforts to constantly publish and seek avenues for her work on the uses of digital technologies in teaching and learning:

I love researching, so that's the component of academia that is very exciting for me really. If a person would say to me let's write a paper, I would always say yes. Obviously, it must be in my specialisation or what interests me or what is interesting to me or my areas of expertise. It is including technologies, student-teacher mentorship and assessment. So, if anyone could ask me to write on that definitely so that's just one. ... I have published one article last year taken from my PhD that was a huge success for me because I wrote my first single-authored article which is really exciting. ... It has its highs and lows but again if you are passionate about something, it doesn't feel like a burden. ... I love that. (Ntando)

Overall, black women ECAs' response to the publish or perish discourse is one of strategic compliance, rejection, and at times it is characterised by the love of research and publishing. This complex/nuanced/multidimensional response is largely shaped and influenced by the research-intensive nature of this higher education institution and the expected research performances of novice academics. Furthermore, participants noted

the gendered/patriarchal/sexist nature of the publish or perish discourse and that male academics do not have to navigate the invisible labour that affects black women ECAs who are forced to choose between their work and their family responsibilities.

## Returning to Theory

The publish or perish discourse is largely an unsustainable and deeply damaging neoliberal social construct that is meant to turn academics in general and black women ECAs in particular into factory producers of knowledge. The emergent decolonial ethic in the global South in demanding the need to re-think/re-consider/re-imagine the purpose(s) of higher education should take the discourse on in 1) challenging the value of the publish or perish discourse for academics, and 2) helping us to reimagine what a transformative and inclusive university—what Mbembe (2016) calls the “pluriversity”—could look like in practice. Black women ECAs struggling to navigate the publish or perish discourse and its gendered/patriarchal nature are likely to become the pariahs of the academy in that they will be deemed “unable”, “incompetent” and “struggling” academics who need decontextualised approaches to help them cope with the demands of higher education. This fundamental misframing and misrecognition will result in higher education institutions—instead of grappling with the structural orientations of the neoliberal order in its midst—rather opting to “discipline” and “train” ECAs into competitive researchers who can compete with the demands of the academy. This approach, what Fraser (2000) would term an integrationist or assimilationist stance to social justice, is not really designed to challenge, dislodge or counter the neoliberal logics of the publish or perish discourse, but is meant to pacify and sanitise black women ECAs into compliant and competitive researchers in the field.

As suggested earlier, Fraser’s conception of social justice is premised on the understanding that parity of participation is needed in society so that real and meaningful justice can be achieved. This means that for black women ECAs struggling to navigate and negotiate the publish or perish discourse in their lives, parity cannot be achieved as they are still struggling to balance teaching and learning, as well as research commitments. Black women ECAs who love teaching and learning continue to feel marginalised, unsupported and pushed to the periphery of the academy, as research continues to have a higher socio-economic currency than teaching and learning when it comes to promotions, grants, and rewards.

This obstacle is no doubt socially produced by the emergent institutionalised and hierarchicalised hegemonic cultural values present in our neoliberal condition where academics are expected to publish as much as they can so that ratings, rankings, institutional standing, funding, subsidies, and grants can all be achieved. This for us creates the condition of possibility that misframes and misrecognises black women ECAs and their state in South African higher education.

We now move to the conclusion.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored and theorised black women ECAs' experiences in navigating the publish or perish discourse in a South African university. Through the use of a qualitative interpretivist case study, we purposively recruited and interviewed 10 black women ECAs to shine a spotlight on how they grapple with the publish or perish discourse in their professional lives. We drew on Fraser's social justice framework to help us think through the neoliberal pressures and challenges that black women ECAs are confronting. The findings revealed that the research participants have a complex relationship with the publish or perish discourse, with some participants hating research and not seeing its societal or instrumental value. These participants preferred teaching and learning, and felt that the university did not support them. There were some participants who truly love research and publishing, and who felt that the neoliberal university turn towards what Mamdani (2007) calls the "scholars in the marketplace" is not a real challenge for higher education. The findings also revealed the gendered and patriarchal nature of the publish or perish discourse, with some participants expressing the challenges of balancing being a mother, academic, wife, and daughter, among others, and still being expected to publish as much as their male colleagues. Based on the above discussion, we suggest that academic development could be at the forefront of tapping into the black women ECAs' experiences in generating bottom-up and democratic/inclusive/socially just interventions on what is to be done to help make the ECA experience developmental and fruitful. Secondly, future research is still needed on the proposed "line of sight" interventions where academics are meant to choose the different career paths open to them, split between teaching and learning, research, and university leadership. Could this be the intervention that is required in the academy? Could this potentially help alleviate and counter the hegemonic publish or perish discourse for those academics, including black women ECAs such as Zinhle, Thabiso and Bontle, whose academic interests lie outside the neoliberal research agenda? These and other questions could be pursued in future research.

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