Positioning Home for Resilience on Campus: First-Generation Students Negotiate Powerless/full Conditions in South African Higher Education

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Abstract

Recognising the authoritative de/legitimising power of education systems, this paper contributes to studies concerned with the ways in which new entrants to higher education experience the positioning of their inherited identities as they negotiate their transition to campus life. The findings emerged during a broader psychosocial study of the transitions of seven first-generation students at a technical university in South Africa. The nature of their self-positioning was explored through an analysis of the positioning statements they articulated during photo-elicitation interviews. The university was positioned as a powerful institution, with conditions for both opportunity and alienation. Participants strongly identified with the professional community of practice in Art and Design. However, in relation to the urban campus context, the majority of participants positioned aspects of their home communities as deficit. A case is made for creating conducive conditions that enable self-reflection on students' transitional experiences and develop collective critical consciousness.

Keywords: identity; power; agency; belonging; practice-based; art and design

Conditions for Powerless/full Positioning of First-Generation Students

Globalisation has brought higher education institutions (HEIs) into a highly competitive space. In order to maintain its relevance, authority and universality, the academy is pushed to respond to political and socio-economic demands at the national and global level, while at least making the appearance of acknowledging the heterogeneous nature of students' experiences and expectations. Despite such shifts towards eroding the autonomy of higher education's (HE)

authority and power, it remains that "there have always been conditions upon entry to university" (Pietsch 2016, 13). Particular discursive formations position the student-subject (Foucault 1972) through technologies of power that locate the student in a particular hierarchy of success and expertise which, when linked to failure or rejection, contribute to alienation (Foucault 1979). The tensions between the ideal of the public university in service to the needs of the communities in which it is situated and the conditions to enter HE to which individuals from such communities must submit themselves, is perhaps most clearly evidenced in the lived experiences of new entrants facing the politics of belonging and success (Yuval-Davis 2006, 197).

First-generation students (FGS) are often socially located in ways which disadvantage or reify their inherited identities. US "minority students" are more likely than their white counterparts to be FGS, with 48 per cent of these students differentiated as Latino/a, 42 per cent African American, and 20 per cent English additional language speakers (PNPI 2016). Inequities in that HE system emerge amongst the most economically marginalised of the population. Similarly, in many contexts in the Global South, such problematics are further exacerbated by persistent legacies of troubled histories which are reproduced within HEIs (Jia and Ericson 2017; Shaguri 2013). FGSs in South Africa, the national context of this study, are seen as a particular set of students who *embody* the unequal and discriminatory racialised socio-political past of the country (Heymann and Carolissen 2011). Differing substantively from developed contexts where FGSs are in the minority, they are the vast majority (78%) (South African Survey of Student Engagement 2016) in the South African institution under study. This provides urgency, in addition to rich opportunity, to comprehend the relation of HE environments to the episteme of communities within which they are situated and "how different expressions of identity, especially identity in relation to race, serve to impact on academic practice" (Jawitz 2012, 558).

"Low participation with high attrition rates" (Fisher and Scott 2011, 1, 9) characterises South African higher education, where black students have a participation rate of under 14 per cent of the national gross enrolment ratio (DHET 2015). Given the links between academic identity and academic literacy (McKenna 2004), this paper has emerged from a larger enquiry into academic identity formation (Alcock 2017). Positioning theorists, Harré and Van Langenhove (1999, 17), argue that "fluid positioning, not fixed roles, are utilised by people to cope with the

situation they usually find themselves in." Positioning takes place through discourse which affords people, through their conversations, the opportunity to come to "shared meanings" in ways that are not static (Taylor, Bougie, and Caouette 2003, 204). This movement or flux within identity is facilitated by the positioning of the self and the imposition of positions on the "other" (Boxer 2003, 251). However, as there are power dynamics within relationships, the consequence of this societal "positioning" and "self-positioning" is most often the maintenance of the status quo (Clegg 2011). An influential party, whether an individual speaker or an institutional structure such as a university, may create coercive conditions where those of a less dominant party are constrained by the position into which they have been placed or submitted (Moghaddam, Hanley, and Harré 2003).

To become part of the HE community necessitates that the individual undergoes change on both intra- and inter-personal levels. These "transitional processes" (Ellery and Baxen 2015, 93), when entering a university, have been recognised as causing a state of emotional uncertainty for students (Janse Van Rensburg and Kapp 2014; Zepke, Leach, and Butler 2011) as they negotiate the costs of their assimilation into the institutionalised norms. First-generation students have reduced "point[s] of reference" (Stuart, Lido, and Morgan 2011) on which to draw in order to understand the expectations of this environment and thus may struggle to "feel at home" (Thaver 2010). The families and communities of FGSs, projecting expectations of their own which may be in conflict with that of the student and/or the university, may have limited comprehension of the expectations and experiences students encounter in their daily lives on campus.

When investigating student attrition trends in HE, studies acknowledge the importance of feelings of connectedness and belonging to the quality of student engagement (Soria and Stebleton 2012). Those students who are posited outside of the "mould" of what is acceptable at a university are at most risk of experiencing feelings of isolation and alienation (De Kadt and Mathonsi 2003; McKenna 2004). Working with such students' narratives to better understand transitional experiences (Stieha 2010), the study draws insights from a comparative case study of seven first-generation students at a predominantly black HEI. The study sought to explore how the conditions that they encountered at a university of technology played out in the positioning(s) which those particular students took up, accepted or rejected, as well as the conditions that they placed on themselves, at a point early on in this transition (Alcock 2017).

Following a discussion of our methodological orientation, we discuss the ways in which participants positioned themselves in relation to the power of the university, their academic identities, and their home communities. This is followed by a consideration of the findings of their self-positioning of resilience and agency, and recommendations for conditions which we believe may be conducive to enable FGSs' reflections on their positioning during this transition.

Methodological Processes and Concerns

Psychosocial approaches aim to comprehend the complexities of identity transitions and the conflicts of lived experiences of FGSs (Ellery and Baxen 2015; Janse Van Rensburg and Kapp 2014; Luckett and Luckett 2009) because both extrinsic societal pressures and intrinsic constructions of identity are acknowledged. Positioning theory, in particular, allows for dynamic lenses through which to study the ways in which people comprehend and construct each other, by exploring how their societal roles are constituted by the positions that they "take up." A distinction is thus made between "positions" and "roles," in that the former are not taken to be static—rather there is liminality between the agential and the structural. One of the influential notions of positioning in the social sciences was that suggested by Hollway (1984) when she talked of "positioning oneself" and "taking up a position" and that "discourses make available" the positions that people choose to accept or reject (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999, 16). Thus, positioning theory allows an exploration of the self that is presented to the world, where social acts are located within and between people. Conversations become how the social and the self are constituted when people take up positions (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999, 14–5). Representing how this occurs within conversations, the positioning triangle orientates "rights and duties," "storylines," and "speech acts" at each apex (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999).

Participants of the study were students at a majority black institution located in an urban metropolis of the so-called developing country of South Africa. The HEI is differentiated as a "university of technology" (formerly a "technikon," equivalent to a "college" in the USA or a "polytechnic" in the UK) with its primary purpose being the preparation of graduates for the workplace and as members of professions. As such, it retains much of the modernistic and individualistic ideologies of the (Western) technical education, ensuring "technology transfer and international competitiveness" (du Pré 2009, 81). Following ethical clearance, all 45

students of an Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) in Art and Design were collectively informed of the study. Those who self-identified their generational status as FGS were invited to participate. Of the initial 10 students who volunteered, seven participated fully in the data generation processes, of which two were women (Andile, Hlumela) and five men (Sibusisio, Mcedisi, Keith, Stanley and Khulekani). Pseudonyms differentiate these participants. As with the majority of their peers at that institution, all the participants were between the ages of 19 and 21 years, and were black IsiZulu speakers from semi/rural backgrounds, categorised socio-economically as from "the lower living standards measure categories" (DUT 2015).

Inviting participants to actively create a visual artefact, reflective time was enabled (Gauntlett 2008) for their responses to the prompt: "Take photographs that show you as a student at home and on campus." "Photograph-making is a socially constructive act" (Radley 2010, 275), enabling participants to explore, both literally and figuratively, a "way into" expressing and representing their experiences for another's reception. During semi-structured interviews, each participant discussed the 20 non-mimetic photographs s/he had constructed individually. This arts-based method was underpinned by the understanding that the narrated lived experiences of storytellers are not records of their experiences but rather "representations or interpretations of the world" (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000, 72).

We found that the photo-elicitation method, involving active co-constructed interpretation of the images (Constantino 2008) as the actual intentionality of the participant is positioned as a central determinant of meaning, reduced the "power" differentials between ourselves as researcher-respondents to listener-storytellers. Important in an institutional context where over three quarters (87%) of first-year students are classified as English additional language speakers (South African Survey of Student Engagement 2016), the visualisation process and expression of "playful" metaphors were not reliant on the mastery of words (Belluigi and Meistre 2010).

The three points of reference of the positioning triangle provided the analytical framework. When looking at the language and emphasis utilised, the speakers' intentionality enabled us to distinguish between whether the positioning was a performance, projection or an account of others' beliefs about the self (Dennen 2007). The ability of positioning "to not only shape interactions within each storyline but also to form one's identity over time across storylines"

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(Dennen 2007, 96), helped us to map shifts in the ways our participants developed their academic identities as "newcomers" transitioning to a tertiary environment.

Participants' Self-Positioning of Their Identities and Power

This section outlines the dominant patterns that emerged regarding the seven participants' positioning in relation to the university, the discipline, and their home backgrounds. Selected images and transcript excerpts have been included to provide a tangible sense of the poignancy and illocutionary force of their stories.

"On Campus"

From mechanisms of structural "access" and assessment, through to subtler in/validation of individuals' and communities' ideas, understandings and opinions of the world (Salazar 2013), universities exercise their power. Universities continue to be critiqued for privileging and reproducing Western middle-class, masculine, heterosexual ways and as such play a role in the continued side-lining (at least) and exclusion of minority groups, in some contexts, and of those less politically or economically dominant in others (Pietsch 2016). At the time of our data generation, the participants of this study were as yet unfamiliar with the explicitly challenging discourses of, and debates around, decolonisation and Africanisation that have since come to characterise student activism in South African higher education. This is perhaps why they were not as conscious of the deficit notion of their home communities they endorsed, positioning the university as necessarily static and unresponsive to the episteme of their marginalised communities.

Against expectations prevalent in literature on FGSs in South Africa (Bangeni and Kapp 2005; Mgqwashu 2009; Nomdo 2006), Andile, Keith and Khulekani strongly rejected institutional positioning of themselves through displays of "individual resiliency" (Rivera 2014). These students consistently drew on their spiritual belief systems for strength and self-validation, in addition to positioning themselves as a foil to aspects of their home community, as we discuss in the sections below. They resisted fear of failure, rejection and self-doubt, which previous studies in this national context have found inhibit the individual agency of FGSs (Janse Van Rensburg and Kapp 2014).

Such resilience was positioned as enabling their agency (Kapp et al. 2014) to access opportunities afforded through the power of such an institution. For instance, the social force

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of Keith's utterances showed excitement, determination and resolve:

> It is the beginning of a journey, where there are all the things that I was dreaming about … It is now the time to study … and here in X, I see everything helps us learn and finish.

Keith's self-positioning indicated that he perceived himself as previously possessing insufficient knowledge to succeed academically in the university context. In his discussion of Photograph 1, his statements revealed that through intergroup positioning (Taylor, Bougie, and Caouette 2003) he had become conscious of the types of behaviour necessary to become a successful student and the strengths these realisations carried:

> Always forecast who has more information about that thing you would like to have. So that's why chickens, they are following a man, because they know that this man is having food that we need.

Photograph 1: "They know that this man is having food that we need"

This meta-cognitive awareness of "how life has changed" through the value of access to empowering knowledge increased his feelings of developing a new identity as a student. His changed life circumstances provided him access to a new storyline which held the "right" to information and the privileges to become part of the "mainstream." Similarly, Hlumela particularly valued the social richness of the academic environment in the ECP, as "in my class, you meet different people, different minds, different perspectives, ja, you learn a lot."

Stanley demonstrated the sense of self-worth he had gained from realising the importance of

education to his community and himself. He utilised self-positioning to show his determination, which emerged during his reflections on his chosen metaphor of library shelves (Photograph 2):

> What I like about this picture, it is leading me into seeing my future … [I]n order to be successful, I need to study books, and this is the proof of what I am doing in my public library area. And I make use of it when at home.

Photograph 2: "It's leading me into seeing my future"

Envisaged success for these participants related not only to passing programmes and being awarded qualifications, but to access to financial opportunities thereafter. Hlumela positioned the institution as holding the power for a potential change in living standards. Represented by the jewellery she adorned herself with in Photograph 3, the university was positioned as a provider of opportunity for social mobility. In turn she, as the student, had the right and duty to access the socio-economic improvement of her family. This was evident through the illocutionary force of statements such as, "Yes, I can't wait to be something else, make a change in our home." Being a student had changed her self-positioning fundamentally, indicating in her storyline strong expectations of what being a student signifies for "upgrading" her and her family's lives:

> Ja, now we are quite civilised. We have grown up from home. I don't know—I think I upgraded our family to where we are now. I am now at University.

Photograph 3: "I upgraded our family"

Such notions of HE as enabling social mobility are not particular to this context (Southgate et al. 2017). While a recent study of US HEIs acknowledged that intergenerational income mobility impacts access to the top tier institutions, the rates of upward mobility are higher in institutions that enable access to opportunities for students who in the majority come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Chetty et al. 2017). Similarly, the HBI in this study primarily serves students from low-income backgrounds with lower submission selection criteria. What the narratives of these participants revealed was that this characterisation, of the university affording financial opportunity, was inherited from familial expectations. As a FGS, Stanley assumed the duty as an important part of his family as a potential breadwinner, noting that, "I am the first one to attend a university … and they are reminding me of the purpose of me doing this."

In addition to such positioning asserted through institutional power were participants' negotiations with academic identity. Such identity formation involves subtle interactional dynamics between personal identity against the collective identity of university communities. It has been argued that this collective identity is the necessary context against which a healthy personal identity develops (Taylor et al. 2003, 197). However, it is important to ask which collective identity a student might possibly use as a foil to their individual identity, and the significance of this for their previously formed personal identity. Such questions included consideration of an environment where the majority of their peers were from similar home

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communities as FGSs, and the significance of this social collective on individual identity formation and positioning of roles.

All the participants constructed their positioning statements in relation to their identities in Art and Design, the domain of these students' academic studies. Prevalent with teachers in that domain (Belluigi 2017), the participants' academic identities were strongly intertwined with their in-group membership of the professional community of practice. At this early stage of their transition, the participants actively integrated aspects of this academic identity into their existing identities. For instance, Keith discussed how he positioned himself as in the process of becoming a member of this community:

> I committed with a lot of people who are an artist, who are in different fields, like professional people, so I feel like that I am comfortable.

His reflections incorporated the facets of academic identity, as the ways of being, doing and valuing when taking on the discourse of a chosen discipline (Gee 1990). Although Keith positioned members of the discipline as having the right to hold the "key" to his success, he accepted the impact of this on him in a positive way and utilised it to keep focused on his duty as a student to keep up the hard work:

> What gives me energy is to commit myself with people who have a lot of knowledge ... That is why it is like magical … I get energy to see someone who holds the door to what I want to do one day … [H]ere in X as we have lecturers … those who did art before … we have to stick on them to get that information that we need.

Photograph 4: "So everything that I am doing I must show myself that I am an artist"

Keith articulates an acute awareness of his duty to behave in ways that accord with this new identity (Photograph 4) amongst the members of his new, academic, community:

> So everything that I am doing I must show myself that I am an artist because in each and everything that you are doing, you have to show to people the way you commit yourself with people. The way you behave in a community, the way you communicate with the people, have a concept that you are an artist.

A study of first-generation Latino/a students in the US found that students who were successful had created relationships with faculty, dedicated more time and energy to academic engagement, and used social skills and self-knowledge alongside their academic capacity (Garza, Bain, and Kupczynski 2014). Enrolled in an extended curriculum course, it was anticipated that they may have perceived themselves as positioned outside of the mainstream. However, their self-positioning indicates that certain conditions within the curricula of the Art and Design ECP created conducive conditions for their transition to professional identities, possibly through the experiential engagement and practice-based learning inherent to studio education. This sense of identification brought with it a sense of belonging which in turn may have enhanced resilient behaviour.

Scholars have long argued that academic identity is enhanced as a student develops a sense of professional identity and starts to feel in control of their learning and discipline knowledge (Solomonides, Reid, and Petocz 2012). Developing the ways of being that arise from the

varying epistemologies within which students are learning to "be" informs the growth of a student's academic identity (McKenna 2012). The importance of these subtle transitions for Keith, and his capacity to deal with these shifts in an evaluative manner, was evident in his observations of his behaviour and autonomy ("I have to control myself … maybe I will manage to make it better"). Through such expressions of his duties and rights, Keith positioned himself as a newcomer to the situation of being in a university. He talked of being far from his role models, his parents ("I am far from parents who are guiding me with things"), having a new lifestyle ("experiencing a new life") and a new role ("I am a new resident here") as a university student.

 As Keith narrated his story of entering the university, he expressed what he saw as his duties: "now it is like I see where I am going, and what things I should leave, what things I should take, in order to succeed in what I am looking for." He articulated his subsequent related rights when stating that

> it is different now from where I am from, because your mind can change because of where you are. So as I am here all the things that I was thinking whilst I was at home is different.

Mcedisi exhibited a similar sense of pride in his new identity as an artist. In his storyline, a strong academic identity starts to form in his home environment, of which his appreciation was apparent. This identity was something that defined and "protected" him at home, allowing him the social space to resist those peer influences he perceived as potentially jeopardising his future:

> I was painting my first picture … Everyone was seeing my work and they were happy … [I]n my holidays … I did this project we were given, but then I was happy because then I improved as an artist. I am an artist. That is why I am really happy that I have art, because it is keeping me busy, and it keeps me away from these kind of things. Drinking, smoking.

In this section, we discussed how all the participants positioned their academic identities as strongly informed by the professional communities of practice in Art and Design, confirming arguments that the process of developing a strong sense of personal identity for late adolescents transitioning to HE, such as these participants, may be enriched by environments in which they are socially and cognitively engaged (Gurin et al. 2002). In the following section, the dialectical positioning between the home and the campus communities, alluded to above, is explored in reference to instances where participants positioned this dichotomy more overtly.

"At Home"

Over 15 years ago it was argued that FGSs would find it increasingly difficult to feel connected to their home identities in South Africa (Bangeni and Kapp 2005), because the dominant episteme of the Eurocentric university acts as the framework within which the "I" is assimilated. It was asserted that they would develop complicated feelings, including that of a loss of belonging to their home community, whilst simultaneously struggling with feeling "at home" in their new university community. Participants' narratives indicated that their changing in-group status as members of the university community impacted on their positioning of their communities, in the main projecting affirming self-identifications to set themselves apart from their peers in their home communities.

Harding (2011) studied disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the US to understand the behaviour of such communities in relation to their educational goals. Due to cultural heterogeneity, such communities were found to exhibit a higher degree of competing "social noise" (Curtis 2015) when compared to middle-class communities that controlled the educational choices their youth make, thereby privileging their cultural capital and reproducing their social order (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). For the vast majority in South Africa, issues of race and geographical location intersect with economic status. Despite some shifts, there remains an alarmingly static status quo which continues to privilege the urban, white, middle class (CEE 2014–15; Kwenda, Ntuli, and Gwatidzo 2015). In the discussion section following, we discuss how social capital and cultural heterogeneity may have played a part in the participants' imagined agency to enact such positioning.

Avoiding the inclusive "we" in her nostalgic references to her home community's loss of self-determination, Andile actively disassociated herself from the community norms and role models she perceived as counterproductive or self-defeating:

> I don't think they have life because they don't have something to live for. They are corrupt … and it is sad because they seem to have lost to know who they are.

Taylor et al. (2003) suggest that positioning can take place "intergroup," where an individual may reposition a group to which they belong to differentiate themselves in relation to that group. Andile particularly wished to distance herself from ways of thinking she characterised as self-limiting, positioning these against notions of enlightenment, progress and agency:

They don't believe in themselves, they don't see themselves in the future … this cloud covering their eyes, they don't see what is happening, they don't think of producing themselves.
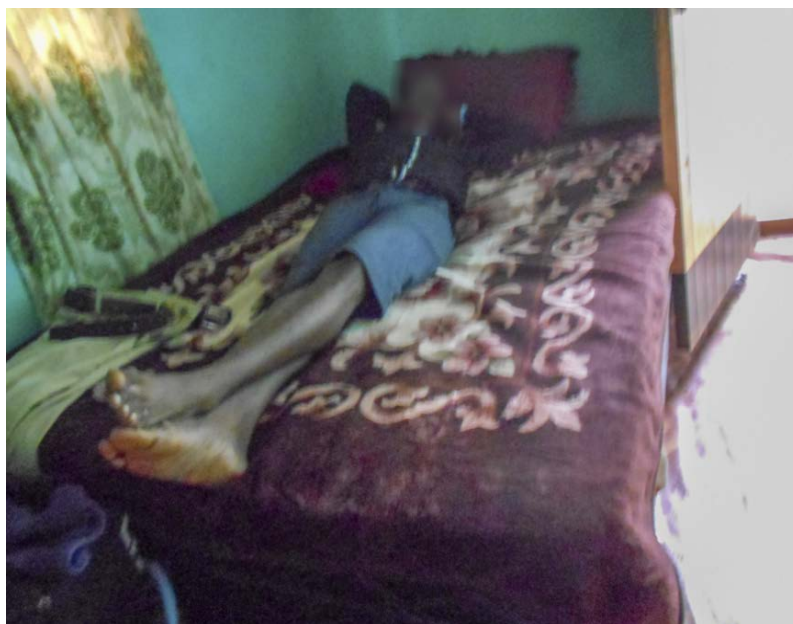
Photograph 5: "I have got a double bed in my room, I just bought it"

A further example of the rejection of behaviour associated with such group membership is evident in Sibusiso's counter positioning to those whose behaviour he characterises as unproductive in his verbal discussion of Photograph 5:

> You can see I have got a double bed in my room, I just bought it, and if I compare to other youth, all they think about … is wasting money, like buying alcohol and drugs. They are abusing their systems and bodies, it is not healthy, but they are still going for it … instead of buying serious and important things.

This reflexive positioning in the intrapersonal domain (Moghaddam 1999) enables him to create a concomitant right to "get ahead" in life, which he envisaged as "being responsible" through the accumulation of material possessions.

The contradictions and social troubles Andile located within her home community caused her to reject being positioned as a member of that community in the present ("You just get lost like you are standing in the middle of nowhere and you don't know what you do. That is the place I come from"). She positioned her obligations to that community as threatening to weaken her resolve to live her life differently, made possible by "becoming" a student where

comparatively, "[i]t is a place where you just, you sometimes your sense of belonging, you just know where you belong, what is the right thing to do."

Khulekani positioned himself as having gained access to a privileged position set above that of his home community peers. Counter-transference was evident in his statements, ("I don't like to see someone my age complaining about life"), as he felt that he had been able to overcome his "deep past."

Repositioning oneself as different to one's home community enables one to strategically position another party in a way that would significantly reduce the effect of their actions (Harré and Slocum 2003), to better protect the project of one's own imagined emancipation. Thus such attempts to resist being positioned as part of their home community could be interpreted as self-preservation from accepting the stasis of those disempowered in a context of massive inequality, where exerted obligations might interfere with self-determination of their life plans.

Keith and Sibusiso distanced themselves from their home communities by taking on the position of "accepted" insiders to university group membership. In overt ways, they articulated their awareness that both social location and some forms of capital, particularly those in their home communities, had the potential to limit their *success* in their university communities and thereby hold them back, as individuals, from achieving the potential they sought. All the participants resisted such identification during this time of transition, casting themselves as exceptional in "superhero" guise (Baldridge 2017). They used newly gained social capital enabled by university group membership to reject the kinds of positioning that their home communities could not project. The transitioning process had developed their capacity to discern what was acceptable and what had currency in those differing social contexts (Gallagher 2014) of home and campus communities. Their narratives and self-positioning, within the power of opportunity projected on the university community, enabled them to envisage being free of the effects of "bonding social capital," which was similarly positioned as "trapping" individuals in cycles of communal poverty (Gofen 2009, 107).

Indeed, for Hlumela and Stanley, the shift in identity to "university student" brought with it licence to contest their positioning in society as "disadvantaged." It is possible that such perceptions of agency were imposed from external projections of their home communities as lacking or deficit, as the national discourses in the media and other powerful cultural producers, including HEIs, positioned such communities from lower socio-economic backgrounds as

such. Poverty and inequality are seen to significantly reduce such students' chances of participating and succeeding in higher education (CHE 2014). Traces of mental colonialism are discernible in the indications of distaste at certain behaviours and aspirations for being "civilised" (Hlumela) through education and economic mobility. Whatever the complex reasons behind this may be, a sense of growing agency emerged conclusively. Enabled by self-affirming notions of pride and worth, such repositioning was most explicit in the narratives of Andile ("They don't think of producing themselves"), Sibusiso ("If I compare to other youth, all they think about … is wasting money") and Hlumela ("Now we are quite civilised. We have grown up from home") as *distinct from* their home community.

Positioning Participants' Stories

Whilst the section above outlines the ways in which these students *chose* to abandon or disengage themselves from aspects of their social locatedness at a very early point in their negotiation of campus culture, it is important to acknowledge the geopolitical nature of the socially constructed residences (Jackson 1999, 38) of "home" and "campus" that we suggested in the photo-elicitation task. What informed the initial inclusion of those spatial territories is the "socio-political and socio-historical happenings of a society" (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000, 67) that are embedded in the stories of such individuals. Recognising the powerful positioning of HE and other cultural discourses prevalent in contemporary South Africa, it is possible that the students were already locked in an I–Other dialectic, which Foucault (1979) argues confines choices regarding self-definition. Whilst cast in positive self-valorising terms, the analysis revealed that for many of the students the emergence of a new identity in academic communities was indeed positioned at the cost of a loss of an old self belonging to the home community. Stieha (2010) warns, in her analysis of the FGS experience in the US, that the need to make a shift in identity to take on the practices required by a university could be disorientating to the extent that students do not persist in their studies. Those experiencing extreme alienation who do manage to persist in their studies may disengage their learning from their desire to preserve themselves, and approach the new academic identity from a superficial perspective (Mann 2001). It is argued that in addition to academic "failure" and self-repression, a disconcerting risk of the transition of campus identities is that disorientated students may lose their home or cultural identities if they perceive HE as inflexible when accommodating or valuing their emotional needs, and cultural and personal identities (Tierney 2000). Moreover, the larger consequences of such disassociation and related counter-transference on the home

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communities in the long term could be devastating.

Whilst as researchers we pay heed to this critical perspective, we feel a similar obligation to others who have attempted to resist this narrative as the only possibility for FGS students in this context (Marshall and Case 2010), particularly as this might drown out our capacity to listen (McLeod 2011) to the stories articulated by our participants. As such, we attempt to rub against the grain of much South African HE research that perhaps unwittingly patronises and stereotypes FGS students as having few social resources at their disposal for making their way into and through HE (Kapp et al. 2014). This small-scale study strongly indicated the belief of the participating students in the development of their agential power through self-positioning. As such, this section considers participants' positioning of their own strength and mobility during this early transition period.

The "fluidity" enabled by the privileged positioning of the newly acquired academic identity and university membership, in addition to the acknowledgement of resilience in contrast to members of the home community, emerged as important for the participants during their transitional journey into HE. Such resilience has been described as the ability to grow emotionally over time by developing coping mechanisms, both pragmatically and conceptually, in spite of adversity (Gordon 1996). Studies on resilience have considered the "risk factors" within situations that impact on how individuals respond to adversity, the "protective factors" through which they respond to risk, and the ways in which the individual compensates for "vulnerability areas" of race, gender, class, FGS status et cetera (Morales 2008).

The "survive and thrive" discourse may well be the flip side of the coin in contexts where "access and success" positions aspects of the home community identity as marginal or deficit to the HE space to which they as "students" must assimilate, as has been noted with academic staff (Idahosa and Vincent 2014; Sulé 2014). The participants in this study, who were from low-income, rural contexts, explicitly positioned their experiences of overcoming hardships of such vulnerability areas in their lives at home as a resource to adapt to the demands of the university community. The characterisation of agency as how people choose to behave in response to life's situations in creative ways (Giddens 1993) is perhaps best placed to describe this driver of these participants' self-positioning. This was overwhelmingly the dominant imagery projected by the participants' dialectic of home versus campus. For instance, Khulekani's memories of childhood experiences forged a positive worldview, which confirmed

the argument that experiences of adversity in earlier life might lead to the development of effective social skills when coping with tertiary study (Marshall and Case 2010). This participant positioned himself as having overcome the combined impact of poor schooling and FGS status, which so often puts university out of reach for disadvantaged students (Abbott-Chapman 2011; Kwenda, Ntuli, and Gwatidzo 2015). He took up the duty to learn from the challenges in his life and subsequently he was able to claim the concomitant right to emotional growth and strength. In the interview, Khulekani articulated resisting feelings of rejection by the academy, and he placed himself in a position of potential power and resilience with the powerful resources of the university at his disposal.

Such findings support a counter-intuitive phenomenon that has been noted in academic resiliency, whereby students show the capacity to use the hardships they are facing as a way to create positive outcomes for themselves (Morales 2008a). An example of this phenomenon emerged in research in the US looking at multicultural environments, academic resilience and student success, which found that where students perceive that they lack the social capital needed for success in university group membership, they actively seek out alternative human connections as a way to build these resources (Morales and Trotman 2004). This emerged in Keith's analogy of the peer learning of chickens and in Hlumela's appreciation of the diversity of the extended programme. In addition, resilience born of a strong belief system was evident in many of the participants' storylines, perhaps as spirituality is often a resource drawn on to provide hope in the context of adversity. Research on academic resilience amongst exceptional US female students of colour found that a strong spiritual belief system was one of the central determinants for successful navigation through difficult aspects of the student experience (Morales 2008a). Through their positioning of duties to the "self" and their spiritual beliefs, Andile, Sibusiso, Hlumela, Keith and Khulekani felt they were able to remain flexible in their responses to life. In a study of South African secondary schools, students from low socio-economic backgrounds similarly turned to "source(s) outside of schooling," such as religion and community organisations, to view life positively, "take control and direct their own futures," and claim the strength to apply and enrol for tertiary study (Kapp et al. 2014, 58). An area for future research is this interrelation between academic and religious identities in FGSs, which has been recognised in other contexts as under-researched (Sanchez and Gilbert 2016).

Participants' narratives revealed a complicated, messy and uncomfortable positioning of the home community in contrast to that of the campus communities. It is possible that the sense of

agency this engendered, and the in-group membership with the numerical majority of FGSs, who would have similarly identified themselves as resilient and privileged above the norm of their home communities, enabled the participants to reduce the ill-effects of the privileged middle-class social capital within that HE environment in their transition to campus life.

Creating Conditions for Affirmative Positioning

The opportunity for reflection, afforded through the composition of metaphoric photographs and subsequent discussion, brought to consciousness participants' positioning of their identities in relation to the university, academic, and home communities as they made the transition to higher education. The participants went on to implement two initiatives which had no earlier precedent at that institution. First, they independently formed a discussion group with the aim of improving their English-for-academic-purposes, negotiating additional time and hosting from tutors of the institution's educational development centre. They then developed and pitched a business idea to the educational development practitioner on their campus. It is worth pondering whether these individuals would have recognised and acted upon such agency without the opportunity for facilitated pedagogical reflexivity provided by this research process.

Informed by the feedback of the participants regarding the methods of this study, we foresee validity in further initiatives and studies aiming to create conditions for FGSs that are conducive to self-reflection in this transitional period in contexts where they are in the numeric majority. It has been noted in the context of community colleges in the US that valuable contributions can be made through "creating learning environments that allow students to cultivate a sense of belonging and voice in the academy" (Jehangir 2009, 48). It has been found that psychological interventions, as "methods for change" (Jury et al. 2017), improve the quality of experience of students from low socio-economic groups because they can "imagine a future possible self" (Clegg 2011, 94) in the initial stages of contact with the demands of a university.

However, opportunities for in-depth reflection, such as those enabled by the photo-elicitation process, may be useful for students from all backgrounds to consider what their home experiences might mean to them and how student lifestyles differ at the socio-emotional level. Photo-elicitation encourages "breaking the frame" of everyday and taken-for-granted experiences, which when represented visually enables participants to "deconstruct their own

phenomenological assumptions" (Harper 2002, 21), and possibly empowers them to better negotiate the institutional power and politics of group membership to some extent.

The act of photographic construction, as an exploration of developing student academic identity, might fruitfully serve as a created "ritual of enactment" in the transitional process students undergo in order to "become students" (Pansters and van Rinsum 2016, 22). Although such rituals typically occur at the level of institutional identity (Pansters and van Rinsum 2016), in this time of disrupting institutional norms, such a ritual may be an appropriate intervention for students' cultural transition between communities which recognises the conflict of that which is negotiated and lost at the level of lived experience, and creates openings for collectively envisaging counter narratives to such politics of belonging.

Reiterating Insights

The insights of this study rub against the grain of the dominant positioning of FGSs in South African HE. Recent research suggests that "academic development initiatives," albeit often benevolent in nature, have been largely "predicated upon a discourse of student deficit" (Ellery and Baxen 2015, 94), as educational development in this context is informed by the critical tradition of adult education that positions the social as outside of the self (Belluigi 2012). As such, this small-scale study contributes to a growing body of empirical studies that critique the construction of such students and their home communities as not having the necessary resilience and capital to succeed in HE (Kapp et al. 2014). As pointed to in their self-positioning, there were indications that these student participants had started to develop a strong sense of their academic identity and the related identity of a professional community of practice, which has been noted as a feature of participants in Art and Design education (Orr 2011). All the participants adopted the empowering capital provided by their positioning as group members of the university community, particularly evident through their dissociation from those aspects of behaviour that they perceived as socially locating their home communities as "disadvantaged." Utilising this evaluative knowledge meta-cognitively during their transition to university, they positioned themselves in ways that affirmed the aspirational potential of such privilege for social mobility. However, at this early stage in their transition process, there were little indications that participants had yet been enabled to think critically of the significance of such deficit positioning of their home communities. Such positioning is of concern, as it unwittingly adds to the injustice of significantly lower participation rates of such

students from previously disadvantaged population groups (CHE 2013). An argument is made for campus rituals that create the conditions for students to consider, through reflection, how they might better use their agency to make sense of, resist, or take up their positioning within the HE environment.

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