

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Morphogenesis Account of Student Leaders' Development of their Agency in their Undergraduate Residences at Stellenbosch University

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Abstract

This article offers an account of the development of student leaders' agency within the institutional culture of their residences at Stellenbosch University (SU). Residences at formerly white universities such as SU are struggling to align their welcoming practices and cultures to the requirements for immersion of the diverse students who now live in them. This article focuses on student experiences of alienation in SU residences with a particular interest in how they develop adaptive responses to establish a place for themselves in them. It is based on focus group discussions with student leaders which provided insights into their perceptions of their residence cultures and how they established their agency in this environment. The analysis presented in the article is based on Archer's theoretical approach to morphogenesis. The first data section of the article discusses the interaction between the students' immersion in the institutional culture of their residences, on the one hand, and the acquisition of their initial identifications in response to the environmental cues of their residences, on the other. The second data section discusses the students' active acquisition of their social identities, which allowed them to establish their aspirant pathways at the residence and the university. Overall, the article offers an account of morphogenesis at work at the institutional level of SU's residences with a specific focus on the adaptive behaviour of student leadership in this university context.

Keywords

student leadership, residences, morphogenetic approach, university transformation, institutional culture, student identity, student agency

Introduction

This article presents a discussion of the development of the agency of student leaders in the context of their living experiences in Stellenbosch University's (SU) undergraduate residences. It examines how these students develop and employ their agency in pursuit of their educational goals. The focus is on a demographically diverse group of student leaders. These students come to the university with their particular histories and identities, which

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position them in a particular way. Over time they establish their agency and identity with respect to their institutional behaviour.

Archer's morphogenesis theory (1982) is used in this article to describe the interactions between structure, culture and agency in informing and shaping the student leaders' behaviour. The contention is that the student leaders develop their agency by "counter-positioning" themselves in their interactions with the institutional culture of residences. They speak back to the institutional culture by establishing their agency within the structural and cultural context of the residences. They do this by constantly evaluating the environmental cues in the residences; they reflect on their default positioning in relation to these cues and then adjust their behavioural responses in pursuit of their academic, social and leadership goals.

This article is based on a larger qualitative study investigating the student leaders' immersion and behavioural adaptation in their residences at SU. The analysis presented in this article is based on research done with 15 student leaders in seven selected residences at SU. The study employed qualitative methods to understand the experiences of these student leaders in the residences. Based on inductive analysis, the two key themes that emerged from the data to form the basis of this article were: (1) environmental cues at work in the residences, and (2) the emergence of the student leaders' social identity. These themes are utilized to provide a narrative account of the students' agency-based development practices within their residences.

Theoretical Framework

We proceed from the view that universities and their residences are social systems constituted at the intersection between structure and agency (Archer, 1982). Drawing on Archer (1982), this article uses morphogenesis as a theoretical approach to analyse how structural and cultural dimensions interact and shape social practices. Morphogenesis is a process that describes the changes in social systems due to the interaction between structure and agent (Archer, 1982). This approach is cyclical and consists of three overlapping phases: (i) structural conditioning, (ii) social interaction, and (iii) structural elaboration (Archer, 1982). *Structural conditioning* refers to the initial distribution of material goods and cultural qualities and provides the context in which action is conditioned. A particular space can thus constrain or enable the exercise of human agency. *Social interaction* refers to the actions taken by agents within a context not of their own making. If these actions are effective and transformative, *structural elaboration* occurs, yielding new social possibilities and signalling a new cycle, introducing new conditional influences for future action (and future agency) (Archer, 1982). This approach emphasises the bi-directional force that agents and structures exert on one another in producing change. Research on student learning in higher education is generally concerned with the morphogenesis of student agency (Case, 2015). Universities hope, for example, that students "leave higher education with different knowledge and capacity for action than that with which they entered" (Case, 2015, p. 843). We consider the possibility of transformation and institutional change at the residence level.

Agential morphogenesis is dependent on the agent's experience of, and responses to, an institution's structural and cultural qualities, which are encountered as students experience the university's lived institutional culture. Institutional culture has a subjective dimension, which comprises of shared assumptions, meanings, understandings and values, as well as an objective dimension, including physical artefacts, organisational stories, and rituals and ceremonies. The prevailing institutional culture of a university cannot be seen as isolated from the outside world nor detached from its past (Agbedahin & Agbedahin, 2019). Even though South Africa is a democratic nation, the legacy of apartheid still lingers within educational institutions (see Hunter, 2019). Similarly, South Africa's colonial heritage continues to influence the discourses and behaviour in these tertiary establishments (Fomunyam, 2015). Although these historical roots cannot account for the entirety of the present institutional culture of any university and residence, they do play a significant role due to their structural and emergent properties. Research done on institutional culture in South African universities refers to people's experiences, especially those of black South Africans, as marked by racial undercurrents (Higgins, 2007; Matthews, 2015; Vice, 2015). According to Vice (2015) and Higgins (2007), this has led to the cultural contexts of higher education institutions being characterized by "whiteness" as normative. However, what these practices of "whiteness" entail has been vague. In addition to critiquing this vagueness, Vice also rejects such race-only accounts and calls for exploring the influence of race by also taking into account the impact of the "gender, class, religion and able-bodiedness (and their intersections)" on institutional culture (2015, p. 47). It is in this light that the present article examines how students from various social positionings experience the institutional culture at SU residences.

The theoretical framework presented above helps us analyse the dynamic relations and formative interactions between the cultural and structural elements of the university's residences and the students' developing agency. The institutional culture of SU, which is not of the students' own making, provides the background and basis for the development of differently positioned students' agency. As they encounter the institution, their social interactions take place in specific settings and relationships. The nature of these social interactions determines the degree to which they can fulfil their educational aspirations. Based on this conceptual framework, this article sets out to analyse student leaders' agential development at their SU residences.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger study that focuses on student leaders' behavioural identities and agency in university residences at SU. SU accommodates students from diverse backgrounds, with 43% of students being from black, coloured and Indian racial backgrounds in 2020, which represents an increase from 36.6% in 2014 (Stellenbosch University, 2021). Even though access to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds has increased, the institution still struggles with institutional cultural transformation, characterized by students' negative experiences at the university (Fataar, 2018).

To understand some of these students’ subjective experiences within their university residences, we employed a qualitative methodology that aligns with the interpretivist paradigm (Scotland, 2012). In the context of this study, it was important to select participants who had had the opportunity to develop their agency in a concerted manner over a period of time in the residence. To this end, purposive sampling was employed, as this allowed for the intentional selection of the individuals and sites, in this case, student leaders in residences (Creswell, 2012). The participants selected were in the fourth or fifth year of their university studies and had previously served on their residence house committees (HC), which positioned them uniquely at SU because of the nature of this elected leadership position. HC members fulfil essential duties within their residences, such as serving on disciplinary structures, involvement in safety measures, and educational and social programming. Their primary role focuses on building relations and a sense of community among the residence students, cultivating feelings of belonging and growth. The 15 participants who met the sampling criteria were identified and selected. We chose a diverse group of participants from a range of undergraduate residences. Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of the participants:

Table 1: Demographic distribution of participants

Gender	N	Class	N
Female	6	Lower-middle class	4
Male	5	Middle class	7
Queer	4	Upper class	1
		Working class	3
Race/Ethnicity	N	Home Language*	N
Black	5	Afrikaans	7
Coloured	6	English	7
White	4	isiXhosa	1
Nationality	N	University Residence Type	N
Namibian	1	Single-sex female	7
Nigerian	1	Single-sex male	4
South African	12	Mixed	4
Zimbabwean	1		

The social positioning of students as reflected in the demographic data presented above and their intersectional identities serve as a microcosm of the demographic diversity present at SU. This article is based on focus group (FG) discussions with the participants, which allowed us to ascertain individual and shared thoughts, feelings and meanings related to the research questions. Each of the four FGs consisted of 4-5 participants. The FGs featured discussions of semi-structured, open-ended questions related to their understandings and

experiences of belonging, attachment and agency, along with issues of power, privilege and prestige in their residences.

Music-elicitation techniques were utilized to access participants' thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions regarding their ways of being in their residences and the university (Allett, 2010). The intention was to understand these participants' actions, intentions and beliefs. Before the FGs, students were asked to select a piece of music that illustrated their sense of their journey in residence. They provided a written narrative before the discussion which they shared verbally with the group. The group listened to each song and shared points of resonance with their fellow participants' experience. These discussions provided rich and nuanced data on various environmental affordances and constraints experienced by the students in their respective residences. The participants' written narratives and the transcription of the discussions are the article's primary data sources.

When addressing issues of trustworthiness and authenticity as they relate to challenges that may arise because of the researcher's positionality, it is suggested that researchers need to clarify their biases (Buzzanell, 2017). We acknowledge that the selection of questions, choosing whose voices to amplify, and deciding which data to report on would be informed by our (the authors') own history and culture, as well as experience. This is the case for Davids, lead author of the article and master's student, who previously held the position of HC member, and Fataar, who was the supervisor of the study and an academic at the university. To manage and account for potential bias, we adopted a reflexive orientation which involved joint reflection during the data collection and analysis phases, respectively. Member checking was also done to ensure that participants had an opportunity to express any concerns about the results. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from Stellenbosch University.

We used an inductive approach to guide the data analysis. We first read through the data to obtain a general sense of the material. After that, each text segment was coded with reference to the research question and the emerging themes. During coding, we identified topics related to setting and context, perspectives held by participants, their way of thinking about people and objects, processes, activities, strategies and relationships (Creswell, 2012). This process was iterative, as each additional set of collected data produced new themes that were useful for understanding the phenomenon. These codes were used to build up themes and descriptions (Creswell, 2012). The themes that emerged from this process and the data presented below are based on the environmental cues that act upon students and the emergence of their social identities in the process of exercising their agency in response to these cues.

Environmental Cues at Work in the Residences

This section describes the institutional culture at SU's residences which manifests as environmental cues in two domains: (i) structural and (ii) cultural. Institutional culture refers to values, attitudes, practices and shared meanings which become embedded in an institution, even though they may not be explicitly articulated in policy or procedures (Matthews, 2015). The deeply entrenched nature of the institutional culture often makes it

difficult to pinpoint, yet it conveys strong signals to which those who interact within the institution are attuned. From the data, we describe environmental cues that stem from the way that the participants engaged with questions around institutional culture, power and privilege. Environmental cues are cues that are in place in the spaces around an individual and notify them of what is happening and how to respond to that occurrence. These cues send signals which are interpreted differently and result in different behavioural responses.

(i) Structural cues

Structural cues refer to physical characteristics that can be perceived through the senses. For participants, the names of specific rooms, pictures and words adorning walls in the residences generated specific meanings. The participating student leaders noted that the names of rooms, areas and sections in the residences were predominantly written and verbally referred to in Afrikaans. These names were often on plaques on the doors or at the entrances to these spaces. Similarly, some students reported that posters and notices put on walls by fellow residents were also mainly in Afrikaans. For participants who do not speak Afrikaans, these sets of cues convey meanings of not belonging in the space. Such an experience was captured by Khumalo,¹ who said: “As soon as you walk into the space, you’re like, [...], as a person of colour (POC), as a non-Afrikaans person you go in there and you’re like, ah, the space is actually not for me”.

When it came to photos, participants often described the meanings which they attached to these visual artefacts in terms of the absences that they noticed. For example, when referring to portraits of earlier head students, known at SU as a *Primarius* or *Primaria* as well as house photos, which include all the residents of a specific year and are often hung up in the archive rooms of residences, participants commented on the lack of racial representation in these photos. Referring to these photos, Andrea, for instance, said that “[when] you don’t see people of colour, you’re like, Oh, we only came later”. For the participants, the images of head students do not accurately depict the residents’ current demographic diversity. These images communicated a particular perspective on what leadership looked like in the residences. Similarly, Andrea noted with disappointment that photos of earlier social gatherings included white males but no residents of colour, which sent a signal to her about “who has fun here”.

The structural cues discussed above interact directly with the students’ *primary agency* upon their entry into the residences. Such interaction resulted in students questioning their belonging. This did not happen for all students. The students who questioned their belonging did not speak Afrikaans as a first language, and they fell into the racial categories of black and coloured. Of those who did, both male and female students experienced this questioning of their sense of belonging. The structural cues of the residences thus acted upon these students. The meanings they developed depended on their individual dispositions. These structural cues produced perceived meanings more or less immediately upon participants’ entry into the residences. This contrasts with the cultural cues discussed

1 Pseudonyms have been used for all participants to preserve their anonymity.

below, which had a more protracted impact on students' cumulative meanings attached to their stay in the residences.

(ii) Cultural cues

Cultural cues refer to the “atmosphere” of the residences and include embodied values, implicit understandings and expected behaviours. For the participants, these cues were more difficult to pinpoint and discussions about them were accompanied by a degree of uncertainty, as they sometimes struggled to articulate what they were feeling or how these cues presented themselves. The cultural cues also affected student behaviour more directly.

When asking participants to describe the dominant culture of SU, Sharine responded with “White and Afrikaans”. Sharine further stated: “I felt inferior in the space in the beginning, especially, you know, because of the way I speak Afrikaans, like [...] is it like proper or not”. This statement refers to more than the language. On further probing, Sharine explained that she was referring to her perceptions about how her dialect, accent and even vocabulary positioned her in the residence.

Mbali, a black female student, explained that:

if you are a person of colour, or you do not speak Afrikaans, or you're not comfortable speaking Afrikaans, [...] you automatically feel like you're on the back foot within the community.

The experiences depicted above demonstrate that students experience discomfort based on the prevailing language usage at the residences. Mbali's phrasing “being on the back foot” illustrates how language positions students within the university community. Mbali notes that her residence's HC attempts to conscientize students in their residence and uses English during activities to ensure that no one feels excluded. But when they had a *skakel* (the colloquial term for a social interaction with another residence) with a male residence, the language would revert to an “Afrikaans narrative” (Mbali). This leaves people feeling excluded as “dominant cliques” would form, which creates clear divisions among students based on language, which is often coterminous with race.

Mbali's vignette highlights an essential aspect of structural conditioning: the tension between the specificity of residential environments as they induce integrative and differentiating processes within the broader environment of the university. The interaction between the parts and the whole is an important feature of the morphogenetic cycle, as the nature of the tension that exists within the parts themselves, “produces the state of the whole” (Archer, 1982, p. 476). The structural conditioning of language (and any other property) can thus have different effects on the positioning of students, depending on how such conditioning manifests in the different residences.

These tensions were also evident as students experienced gendered cultural cues which stem from what both male and female participants labelled as a “patriarchal culture” that exists at SU. In their experience, this manifested in the form of toxic masculinity, which refers to non-productive and even destructive behaviour of especially cis-gendered,

heterosexual men. Commenting on the interactions during the anti-gender-based violence (GBV) protests in 2019 and around gender issues on campus, Lance, a male student at a single-sex men's residence, noted that men in his residence showed a general "annoyance" when conversations of gender (and race) came up. Similarly, Carl, a black male student from a single-sex men's residence, remarked that:

the issue that people had [referring to the residents, especially white male residents] with the protest was how it [...], I don't want to, like call anyone out. But like, it wasn't valid, we sort of focused on how respectful the people who came to protest were to us, rather than focusing on the issue that was at hand. And I think that's been a problem in male communities and male spaces.

Carl's comment highlights a reluctance to "call people out," which could be due to his racial positioning in the residence. Even though he enjoys male privilege, being black positions him at a disadvantage compared to his white male counterparts. While Mbali's earlier vignette highlights group tensions between different residences because of language and race, Carl's perspective helps us foreground intergroup tensions within one residence, which seem to be due to racial differences. However, the tensions play out concerning the subject of different beliefs around gender.

Participants who lived in mixed residences seemed to have greater fluidity in their attitudes to the way that gender is understood, expressed and accepted. Lionel, a white, queer, male student, reflects on an unexpected encounter with a fellow student who made him feel welcome in the residence even though Lionel, on occasion, wore heels and make-up. The acceptance of Lionel's expression of his gender identity by students in his residence came as a surprise to him, because even though many other students expressed their queer identity openly in the residence, there were also "very stereotypical white Afrikaans males who were judgmental and apprehensive towards the idea [of expressing a different gender identity than cis-gendered males]" (Lionel). Lionel's intersectional identity and privilege associated with being a "white man" are contested due to his expression of his gender identity. Similarly, Anthony, who also identifies as queer, shared that he could authentically express his gender identity in the residence and felt accepted despite being different. As a black male himself, he also had experiences with other black males who expressed disdain for the way he portrayed himself.

The male participants' engagement with gender cues was determined by their race and gender identification. For the queer participants, gendered cues signalled something about how they go about expressing their personal identity, whether through the choice of clothing or sharing of beliefs. The cis-gendered, heterosexual men encountered resistance in conversation with similarly positioned men due to clashing beliefs about the treatment of women. For the female participants, the gendered cues manifested in a lack of representation of women in positions of power and decision-making more generally at the institution. Rufaro commented, for instance, on the lack of female lecturers in the Engineering Department, while Andrea mentioned the lack of female "role models" at the institution. For them, the anti-GBV movement was a collective "calling out" of men's

toxic masculinity at SU in response to these gendered cues. Mbali went as far as to say that participating in the anti-GBV protests “was the first time that I felt it [belonging]” in the larger SU community. Even though these cues were more prominent for the female participants in the university, exploring them is still significant as such cues influence the potentiality of students’ agency within the micro contexts of the residences. The institution’s history informed the gendered cultural cues along with the behaviours of others. Participants responded to these cues by adopting specific behaviours.

Examples of these behavioural responses were most evident in the cultural cues which participants derived from their class positioning. Class differences manifested in the way in which access to money positioned the students and impacted on their behaviour. Participants stated that the cost of entertainment or recreational events would be a deciding factor in whether they or other residents would attend or not. Rufaro said that “I’m very aware that the price of an event affects the type of people that can attend, obviously, because there are some people that have more dispensable income”. For example, one activity that came up frequently when discussing class differences was the annual house dances of residences. This formal event usually takes place on a wine farm or at the City Hall in the town of Stellenbosch (SU’s location). The dress code for students is formal attire and a three-course meal is one of the night’s highlights. These events cost upwards of ZAR 600 per person. Participants noted that these dances were not generally attended by students who could not afford to pay for the event, mainly students from previously disadvantaged groups.

Participants also said that students were expected to spend money during informal interactions. Examples of such informal interactions included hosting social bonding gatherings that involve those who live on specific floors of their residences and contributing to floor funds that pay for decorations to render spaces more “homey”. Even when residences offered some money to attend house dances or offered free tickets for activities in the residences, many students who could not afford to contribute out-of-pocket for these activities opted not to take up the opportunities. Depending on how students interpreted these class-based cues, they would decide whether or not to attend these activities.

The cultural cues discussed in this section derive from language, race, gender and class and the intersections between them. Unlike the structural cues discussed in the previous section, which generated immediately perceived meanings, the meanings associated with the cultural cues developed more slowly over a longer period. The environmental cues do not have a homogenising effect on all residence students. Consequently, the cues and resultant behavioural responses signify intragroup and intergroup tensions in the micro contexts of the university. These cues condition but do not determine the potential for agency for the differently positioned students, which means that students are able to mediate between the cues, their behaviour and the outcomes of their specific responses. Participants generally selected a course of action aligned with their aspirations and the perceived outcomes of these actions. As Archer (2003) explains, these perceptions need not

be accurate; however, students' perceptions of these outcomes have a conditioning effect on their behaviours and agency.

Understanding how environmental cues may condition student behaviour is essential. This allows us to familiarise ourselves with the challenges students face as well as their opportunities as they develop their agency. The section below will outline how students move through critical moments as they develop their emerging social identities in the residence.

The Emergence of the Social Identities of the Residence Student Leaders

This section describes the adaptation process students undergo as they engage with the environmental cues. It discusses how the participating students' social identities emerged during their time living in residence. According to Archer (2004), an individual gradually acquires a social identity through three developmental processes: primary agency, corporate agency, and becoming social actors. We will discuss each of these processes, starting with their entry into SU and ending with their experiences as HC members. Students' social demographics, life histories and motivations for study and pursuing leadership positions in the residences are central to this account.

(i) The move from primary agency to corporate agency

Per Archer, all of the participants entered SU as *primary agents*. She uses this concept to refer to a person's identity or agency as a result, for example, of being born into certain conditions, such as being female or middle-class and having inherited certain forms of cultural capital from parents, that allow these agents to occupy a place of privilege or disadvantage involuntarily (Archer, 2004). The participants in this study occupied a variety of positions that have been imposed upon them by society. Understanding how students reflect on the positions they were born into is important in accounting for morphogenesis (Archer, 2004). To illustrate how the students reflected on their primary agency in the residences, we turn to Shaun, a coloured, queer student who lived in a mixed-sex residence. Reflecting on his initial sense of belonging, he said: "You know, for someone like me as a POC. I obviously didn't feel that [belonging] once I got there [into the residence] immediately". Similarly to Shaun, students used socio-demographic descriptors of race, language, gender and class as validation of their experiences. Participants thus showed consciousness of their primary identity and hyper-awareness that their experience may be different from those who are positioned in another way.

Even though the environmental cues could constrain the development of their agency, all of the participants in this study moved from primary agency to *corporate agency*. The latter term refers to how students were able to formulate goals and actively organise to achieve these goals. Archer explains aptly:

Only those who are aware of what they want can articulate it to themselves and others, and have organised in order to obtain it, can engage in concerted action to reshape or retain the structural and/or cultural features in question. These are termed corporate agents. (2004, p. 265)

Shaun and Anthony's accounts of their educational pursuits demonstrates such concerted action. They were born into families who could not afford to pay for tertiary education, yet they defied the odds and overcame great struggles to pursue tertiary studies. Shaun "always had this dream of coming to Stellenbosch University". He grew up in Kuilsriver and attended a no-fee high school in the area. In his final year of high school a teacher helped Shaun to apply to a different university in the province. After realising that this teacher had not, in fact, completed the application, Shaun and his mother went to this university, where an administrator shattered his dreams by telling him that he would "never be accepted to any university with those marks". Shaun opted to take an unplanned gap year, during which he applied to SU and got accepted. His father's boss gifted him his registration fee of ZAR 10 000 and he later secured a scholarship for his undergraduate studies. Shaun realised his dream through perseverance and support from family and his community. Perseverance and resilience became key to his university journey.

Anthony is of the view that "I honestly think that Stellenbosch University chose me". Anthony grew up in a township in Strand and lived with his mother, a domestic worker. He comes from a large family of 12 siblings. Anthony attended a Muslim high school college in the area, which exposed him to cultural diversity. After matriculating, he worked at a supermarket to assist his mother with household expenses and support his sister's schooling. He decided to attend SU in pursuit of studies that would give him economic independence later in life. He managed to interact with his peers and lecturers, and the university's support infrastructure gave him confidence and a single-minded focus during his university studies.

These two short biographies illustrate how students transformed their primary agency into corporate agency in the course of seeing through their decision to pursue tertiary education. Through the interaction with family, friends and mentors, they have become transformed. However, participants' corporate agency was not limited to their achieving academic goals but also towards their becoming in other spheres of university life. Helen, who grew up in Paarl and identifies as queer, shared that her *Primaria* inspired her approach to university. During orientation, the *Primaria* shared that "university is about getting more than a degree". Helen thus aspired to grow in many aspects of her life during her time at SU, while always wanting to remain true to herself. Mbali entered SU with many fears, especially related to being away from home for long periods. After entering SU, she felt those fears diminish as a result of her residence community. Her welcoming experience translated into her motivation for pursuing student leadership, as she wanted other students of colour to also experience the same kind of acceptance and inclusion. Helen and Mbali's experiences are examples of how the interaction with others helps with transforming primary agents into corporate agents.

Each participant had at least one story where they reflected on the influence of senior residence students, staff members, mentors or HC members who inspired them to become involved in residence activities or supported them in doing so. These parties are corporate agents who, in serving the House through their various positional and non-positional roles, became catalysts in the participants' moving from primary agency towards corporate agency. Thus, group elaboration was achieved, yielding increased corporate agency (Archer, 2004).

The result was that participants opted to participate in residence sports teams, cultural activities such as SU choral acapella group, and joined organising committees. Immersion in these activities was in direct contrast to the messaging that these cues conveyed. All the POC students became involved in managerial and leadership activities, even though they saw little racial representation in leadership. By merely representing people of colour, or queer bodies on student leadership structures, these participants redefined who could aspire to such positions.

Similarly, they went against the residence cues' representations of "who has fun here" (Andrea). They opted to attend events and participate in activities where they could contribute to the residence and have fun with others. Their ability to actively pursue their aspirations with assistance from others may be why they were able to resist and "speak back" to these environmental cues. This then demonstrates "double morphogenesis", which refers to how these residence-based students become corporate agents who pursued self-directed goals, which in turn impacted on and transformed their residence culture.

The article now looks at these HC roles in order to describe how participants moved from corporate agency to become social actors.

(ii) Becoming social actors

A social actor is someone who can personify a social role in which one's personal identity can be fully expressed (Case, 2015). The social role in question here is that of an HC member in a residence, who holds a position of responsibility and influence, with the power to constrain or enable. Becoming a social actor requires mediation between the personal and social identities of the individual (Archer, 2004). The first move towards becoming a social actor takes place when the personal identity continues to hold sway over the social identity (Archer, 2004). Here students use their previous experiences from their life histories and experience as spectators in the residence to make their initial role choices. All of the students in this study chose to avail themselves of the social role of HC member, an elected leadership position in the residence, which shows that they made the first move towards becoming a social actor.

When they were elected, they had the choice to experiment in order to make the role their own, which is referred to as "personification" (Archer, 2004). During this experimentation, the emerging social identity impacts on the emerging personal identity (Archer, 2004); students experiment and then reflexively evaluate this experience. For the participants in this study, this seemed to be the most challenging stage of becoming a social actor. This experimentation was met with resistance from peers in the residences. Anthony explains that:

I regard myself as a futurist, as an agent for change, as a voice to those who don't have a voice. I don't want anyone to experience what I had in my first year. So, my role is to sort of be the torch there at the end of the tunnel. But that is sort of met with a lot of resistance.

Anthony's initially hesitant persona in his HC role translated into developing an emerging social identity as an "agent of change". His description of his role as a torch bearer shows a level of personification that comes up against resistance from those who want to maintain

the status quo in the residences. Similarly, Andrea recalls a painful incident during her leadership term as *Primaria*:

there was a lot of negative things [said] about me as a Prim. How I'm not representing Moonlight² residence, how dare I make this decision on behalf of Moonlight residence? The House wanted this, why did you decide this for the house? And just that animosity, as like I should have jumped in with this tradition. I shouldn't speak on behalf of Moonlight because I can't represent the voices when some of us don't agree. Yeah, I felt very alone in that moment. But I knew I did the right thing.

Andrea's experience highlights the nature of the resistance that students faced while occupying and experimenting with the HC roles, and the tension between her wanting to make the role her own and her house members' expectations about what she is allowed to do in the role. For Andrea, knowing that "I did the right thing" was important. This shows that she reflected on her actions, how others perceived them, and what she ultimately took from this experience. Such a perspective aligns with Archer's view that experimentation in the making of the HC role impacts on participants' identities as they learn more about themselves and their capabilities, and adapt in response to this learning (Archer, 2004). All of the students in this study embarked on transforming at least one practice, tradition or view in their residences as they occupied their HC role and were met with resistance. This made the move onto the third stage of becoming a social actor more difficult for students, but they persevered regardless.

When students overcome the challenges that emerge during experimentation, they move to the third moment which entails synthesis of the personal and social identities (Archer, 2004); students have to decide how much they will put into the role. Lionel describes his student leadership journey as a "bittersweet duality". He explains that:

student leadership, although it gave me a very good time in my life, it gave me a purpose. It gave me the kind of satisfaction and fulfilment and it gave me drive to work with people, to resonate with people to be a representation for, you know, the first year coming in not knowing anyone, and being scared of being queer, being openly queer [...] at the same time also having this situation be extremely taxing on myself, on my mental health.

Lionel's honesty and vulnerability prompted other students in his focus group also to share their struggles of finding a healthy balance of mind and body in meeting the demands of student leadership. In students' pursuit of realising the potential of the HC role and achieving a synthesis between personal and social identities, their experiences demonstrated sacrifice. Anthony explains that:

Well, I haven't graduated yet because of the many sacrifices but I don't regret any of that. I did doubt myself as to why I made certain decisions. But in hindsight, when I look back at where the community is, at what we managed to achieve for people of colour in this space [...], I am proud that I was part of a narrative, of a vision, of a group that that was steering for, for actual and tangible transformation.

2 Pseudonyms have been used in reference to residence names to further preserve participant anonymity.

For these students, the sacrifices made in the name of student leadership paid off, yet at some cost to other aspects of their lives. This is archetypal of social actors who have been able to make decisions about their concerns and how they prioritise sometimes competing concerns, such as academic achievement versus leadership success. These students thus have emerged as social actors over the time spent in their residences. They achieved this by mediating between their aspirations, dispositions and goals, and the expectations of their HC role. Through experimentation and reflection, they succeeded in making the HC roles their own. They did this despite experiencing some environmental cues as constraining and in the face of resistance from peers.

Conclusion

This article offers a situated account of morphogenesis at work at the institutional level of SU's residences. It offers a perspective that residences are important contexts in which student's adaptive behaviour and leadership response sets are displayed. This article contributes to elaborations on how structure, culture and agency influence the students' being and becoming within university residences (Barnett, 2009). The study employed the theoretical lenses of morphogenesis to offer an account of student leaders' experiences. The institutional culture of the residences condition students' perceptions of, and behavioural responses towards, environmental cues, which are structural and cultural. The environmental cues at higher education institutions in South Africa have been characterized by "whiteness" (Vice, 2015; Higgins, 2007). The accounts from the participants showed that these cues were constraining, as they intersected with race, language, class and gender. Regardless, participants developed defiant behavioural responses and spoke back to the institution in the ways in which they developed their agency-orientated practices.

In terms of students' agency, they could transform from their primary agency at the start of their university journey into social actors. By the end of their leadership term, they had enacted practices that brought about change with respect to greater inclusiveness at their residences. The student leaders thus became change agents in their residences and the broader university. Becoming change agents within the residences was not an easy task, as students faced both personal and environmental challenges along this journey. The environmental challenges came in the form of cues that signalled the conditioning of students' behaviours and senses of belonging. These cues interacted with students' identity and positioning, and students developed behavioural responses to these cues by counter-positioning themselves, that is, intentionally going against the messaging of the environmental cues. They did this by becoming involved in residence activities. Through this initial involvement, they began becoming effective social actors through experimenting with various roles that aligned with their goals. The success of these endeavours propelled them into pursuing positional student leadership, which gave them the space for further exploration that in turn allowed them to integrate their emerging personal and social identities.

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