

Conversations among Black staff members at a historically White Afrikaans university campus on issues of race, social justice and reconciliation

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In an ethnographically designed study, guided by a critical community psychology framework, Black staff members at a historically White Afrikaans university campus conducted email conversations relating to issues of race, social justice and reconciliation. The conversations were initiated by the author (Black) who mainly used prompts found in the local institutional context to elicit responses from colleagues. A critical discourse approach to thematic analysis of the email conversations was followed. The main findings are: Compared to the potential number of respondents (32 Black staff members or 18% of all faculty staff), very few colleagues (9 or 28% of Black staff members) responded via email to the invitations but, when met in person, all expressed strong views on the topics or prompts used in the initialising emails. The critical discourse approach revealed clear psychopolitical awareness and strong discourses of fear, powerlessness and bitterness, as well as a discourse of non-engagement. These discourses appeared in all three domains of analysis: local, institutional and societal. Theoretical explication is sought mainly in resistance theory for the discourse of non-engagement and the scarcity of responses located in the local domain. Transformative resistance is suggested so that alternative discourses are inculcated, at least, in faculties of education at some historically White Afrikaans university campuses.

Keywords: Black staff, historically White Afrikaans university, race, social justice, reconciliation, critical discourse approach, transformative resistance

Introduction

In the ensuing paragraphs I will attempt to contextualise the constructs of race, social justice and reconciliation as they play out in higher education, with the aim of indicating the complex and often even contradictory nature of these constructs. Owing to space limitations, I will not discuss the rich debates on the nature and form of these constructs and will, therefore, opt for the following operational definitions. Race is not regarded in biological terms nor as “undiscussible” (Rusch & Horsford, 2009:303), but rather as a social construct which uses skin colour as point of departure to indicate human diversity. The categories of Black and White are used in this article, with Black signifying the apartheid-designated groups of Black African, Coloured and Indian (Luescher, 2009:416), troubling and insulting as such categorisation might be for some people (Francis & Hemson, 2007:101). Social justice is simply regarded as those actions and awarenesses that work against the creation and perpetuation of social wrongs on account of power imbalances (Stovall, 2006:244). Reconciliation is regarded as a softer, interpersonal and intergroup process of social justice where people from different sides of a divisive history extend dignity and esteem, in a thoughtful manner, to cross the historical divides for the sake of mutual healing in social and psychological terms (Gibson, 2004:202).

Race and social justice in higher education

Moderate success is being claimed as higher education in South Africa negotiates the challenges posed by massification, marketisation and managerialism (Council on Higher Education, 2009:91; Seepe, 2006:56; Singh, 2006:74). Some of these successes involve increasing the number of Black Africans who are rated by the National Research Foundation as researchers of note; a higher number of student enrolments in

higher education with a steady increase in enrolments of Black students, and a percentage split of 40:30:30 that has been attained in the student enrolments for the human and social sciences; business, commerce and management, and science, engineering and technology (Council on Higher Education, 2009:91-92). As is to be expected in the development of the sector, there are still areas of concern.

The slow pace in the increase of appointments of Black staff is cited as a source of concern (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011:82; Cassim, 2005:658; Gibbon & Kabaki, 2006:132). The argument for greater staff equity in terms of racial profile is not new, as Thaver (2003:146) illustrates with her citation of studies dating back to the late 1980s. The diversification of higher education is also not only an enterprise to entice more Black students into higher education, contrary to the assumptions prevalent at historically White universities (Steyn, 2007:10).

In South African higher education race is still a social construct with a strong influence on social and academic life (Finchilescu, Tredoux, Mynhardt, Pillay & Muianga, 2007:732; Jawitz, 2012:3; Tredoux, Dixon, Underwood, Nunez & Finchilescu, 2005:429). At least one of the influences of race on the academic character of higher education in South Africa is, as Thaver (2003:144) argues, that the numeric predominance of White academics leads to a disproportionate heavy anchorage of the higher education sector in the life and world experience of this one sector of South African society.

Similarly, the disjuncture between the rhetoric of change and the privately held convictions of those “whose everyday choices, decisions and manner of operating serve to create and maintain the status quo institutional culture” (Steyn, 2007:5) is a stumbling block towards fulfilling the transformative intentions of higher education legislation. Jonathan Jansen, a respected public intellectual who regularly throws his readership off balance by his challenges to the familiar (Maodzwa-Taruvunga & Cross, 2012:132; Nel, 2009:48), disputes the equity practices of some institutions by expressing concern about the “declining state of the South African professoriate” (Jansen, 2003:9) resulting from fast-tracking practices whereby some Black academics enter the professoriate. These fast-tracking practices led Jansen (2003:10) to arrive at the conclusion that it leads to a “dumbing down of the professoriate”. This is, however one looks at it, a harsh judgement of Black professors who obtained their university positions through the fast-tracking mechanisms. Lamenting the fast-tracked entry of Black academics into the professoriate is to some extent odd, given Jansen’s (2005:311) self-acknowledged fast-tracked exit of White academics during his stint as dean at another institution. The power to effect such entry and exit is held by certain seats in higher education, not by ordinary staff members.

The point I want to make is that an unfortunate perception can be created about Black professors and academics in the vein of “white excellence/black failure” (Robus & Macleod, 2006:473). Such Black staff can be perceived as the favoured fast-entrants of those higher education leaders sympathetic to the new social justice discourse or even as the (deanly) cause for the ejection of perceived experienced White academics. With a respected Black scholar making such statements as “dumbing down of the professoriate” (Jansen, 2003:10), the potential for the adverse reception of such Black academics in higher education is created. Couple this with the resistant mindset of some White staff in higher education (Steyn, 2007:5) and the scene is set for an environment, post-1994, in which White-dominated higher education can become an inhospitable space for ordinary Black staff who cannot fast-track the exit of resistant White staff, nor the entry of Black staff. Thus, the issue of the meaningful inclusion of Black staff is the terrain of social justice. Inclusion ought to be a transformative enterprise which is undergirded by social justice practices such as the examination of ideological and historical assumptions about difference, and resistance against the marginalisation of groups (Artiles, Harris-Murri & Rostenberg, 2006:267).

Reconciliation and intergroup contact

Criticism against a focus on the experience of Black staff can be expected because it might not be regarded as contributing to the reconciliation project in South Africa. The critics may argue that Black academic staff should show more resilience since Black people have the numerical majority in the seats of political power. Such critics may also cite the numerical advances made by Black entrants to higher education as students and staff. These forms of criticism may raise substantive points, but it would still sound dishonest

if it were suggested that, in the main, historically White Afrikaans university campuses are the most hospitable spaces for Black academics to enter. Durrheim, Tredoux, Foster and Dixon (2011:276) found that Whites are pressured by changed societal norms to express less prejudice but, at the same time, they evidence very little historical change in the larger social distance that they prefer for Black others to hold. Bearing contact theory in mind (Tredoux & Fichilescu, 2007:668-669), it then seems almost logical that, if more Black staff enter historically White universities, more harmonious group relations between Black and White should result. This logic is, however, challenged by studies which found that having different racial groups in the same educational space does not necessarily lead to a decrease in prejudice (Keizan & Duncan, 2010:481; Walker, 2005:53).

Reconciliation, then, cannot be read only from the increasing numbers of Black staff added to higher education institutions. Contact facilitated by increasingly racially integrated higher education workplaces is also not a panacea towards reconciliation. Tredoux and Finchelescu (2007:675) cast aspersions on the value of intergroup contact by suggesting that some forms of contact may be detrimental to the ideals of reconciliation and even social justice. Active resistance to contact may even be, in some circumstances, a better strategy to improve intergroup relations (Tredoux & Finchelescu, 2007:675).

As is evident from these introductory remarks on the place of race, social justice and reconciliation in higher education, I take a critical view of the concepts and how they play out in higher education. This view is informed by the theoretical framework of critical community psychology within which this study is couched.

Theoretical framework guiding the study

Staying true to my discipline, I use a critical community psychology framework. This is a form of community psychology which, like all community psychology strains, still focuses on the relation of the individual with his/her social context (Kitching, Roos & Ferreira, 2011:247). The ‘critical’ part of this framework assesses any engagement for its psychopolitically valid ways of dealing with power (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003:198). Psychopolitical validity refers to the need to consciously investigate the presence, role and configuration of power in people’s relations within and with their social environment (Prilleltensky, 2003:199; Prilleltensky, 2008:129). Therefore, the inclusion of arguments from spheres such as Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995:48; Stovall, 2006:244) comes naturally to a study which is guided by critical community psychology. Community psychology in South Africa has, from its appropriation by radical, critical psychologists in the years of struggle against apartheid, always been informed by a critical agenda (Seedat & Lazarus, 2011:244). Another characteristic of critical community psychology is that its notion of community allows for diversity within. A community is therefore understood as containing both overt and covert differences, which make it very difficult for anyone to claim to understand and know a particular community in all its complexity, even when the physical rootedness and social cohesion in a community are apparent (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009:223). Some of the values guiding a critical community psychology include addressing oppression; social justice; building a psychological sense of community, and personal and political empowerment (Lazarus, 2007:69-71; Nelson, Prilleltensky & MacGillivray, 2001:652).

Problem statement

With the literature review and theoretical framework as backdrop, the problem identified for this research is that the official narratives and reporting of numbers by higher education institutions mostly do not provide the depth that smaller narratives about racial dynamics and experiences can provide. This small-scale research project attempted to determine the breadth and depth of conversations relating to issues of race, social justice and reconciliation, among Black staff members in a historically White Afrikaans university. The above cursory literature review intends to indicate the complexity and the often contradictory nature of the issues under discussion.

Background

This study was conducted in an education faculty of a three-campus merged university in South Africa. The first campus consists of a former rural homeland university where a large majority of Black African students and lecturers still form the predominant racial demographic of the campus; the second campus consists of a former Black distance education university campus and a campus of a former White Afrikaans university. The third campus, where this research took place, consists of the main campus of a former White Afrikaans university with White Afrikaans speakers still forming the predominant racial demographic of students and staff on-campus. As a disclaimer it should be mentioned that this university is not the one to which the author is attached at the time of submission of this article. For ethical reasons, direct references to the identity of this university campus will be avoided to protect the participants; thus, no documentation from this campus will be cited in the reference list.

According to the education faculty's annual report for 2011, of the 174 staff members, 32 are Black, which represents 18% of the staff total. The percentage of Black undergraduate students in the on-campus B.Ed. programme is 25% out of the 2840 students. In the distance education programmes 87.5% of the more than 30 000 students are Black.

The rationale behind the research is found in a string of email correspondence (sent to all who were on the address list) between myself and a fellow Black colleague. This correspondence ensued after another Black colleague attempted to organise a combined birthday party for a few Black colleagues in his school in the faculty who had their birthdays in the preceding few weeks. This type of all-Black gathering was a regular occurrence, but the first colleague suggested the inclusion of all members of the school in which the birthday people were employed. Bearing the precedent of previous gatherings in mind, I responded to express the opposite viewpoint by stating that social gatherings of this nature did not have to be inclusive affairs. The colleague disagreed with my viewpoint and reiterated her stance that all her colleagues should be invited as she valued them in the workplace. I replied in a lengthy way arguing about the need to have gatherings that run counter to the White staff hegemony in which we are daily engulfed in our faculty. I also posed two challenges to those on the address list: Did we really have such racially blind social practices in our ordinary social lives outside of work that inviting White colleagues to this gathering would be a normal occurrence? Did we really contemplate how much of our desire to include or exclude White colleagues reveals psychological damage? Again, the colleague responded and stood by her point, this time lamenting my missive as making the correspondence "a sounding board for political beliefs" and making "the smallest thing a racial issue". My reply was that "by closing such discussions about uncomfortable issues prematurely, we miss opportunities for growth". Our correspondence on this topic ended, a little acrimoniously, thereafter. Through this whole process of correspondence no-one else participated, but the colleague and me. This lack of participation sparked my research interest.

Methodology

Design

This research was designed as an ethnography since I would assume the role of participant-observer (Du Plooy, 2009:210). Through this research I attempted to place the social conversational encounters with my colleagues, and the understandings derived therefrom in a meaningful, meaning-making context (Tedlock, 2000:455). Given my active, direct participation that preceded the formal research process and that I participated in the research process itself, it could not be ruled out that elements of an auto-ethnography would also form part of the design. The autobiographical style of writing is a strong indicator of the auto-ethnographic nature of some of the data provision (Ellis & Bochner, 2000:739). Some critique against auto-ethnography is that it is "essentially lazy" research due to the lack of distance between characters (Delamont, 2007:2), but I maintain that such research can add value. Ethnography and auto-ethnography create space for the validation of personal experience by linking its different layers of consciousness to an area of knowledge (Ellis & Bochner, 2000:739; Tedlock, 2000:455).

Ethics

I emailed an invitation for participation to my 31 Black colleagues with whom I served in the faculty at the time. The invitation included an ethical consent understanding that when they reply to my work email, private email, office telephone, mobile phone or in person, they do so in the knowledge that their responses are for research purposes only, and with protection of their personal identifying particulars (Christians, 2000:139). Owing to my intimate role in this research, as someone who was in collegial and friendship relations with my colleagues, it is imperative that, for the sake of relational ethics, I also protect mutual respect together with dignity (Ellis, 2007:211).

Invitation to participate and prompting

Drawing their attention to the correspondence that I had with the colleague who disagreed with me, I invited Black colleagues to supply their thoughts regarding issues of race, social justice and reconciliation. In the ensuing months, I elicited responses by adding, at the end of 2011, a notice written in Afrikaans that I had photographed in an examination room in our faculty. This notice requested silence for the sake of students writing examinations, but singled out cleaning workers and pets ('skoonmakers en troeteldiere' in Afrikaans) as the special audience for that message. In 2012, I added (with the knowledge of the official) email conversations that I had had with a university official about a tragic event that had occurred during the first-year students' reception programme. In that incident a Black first-year student had drowned during one of the activities that formed part of the official reception programme.

Data analysis

The data obtained were thematically analysed by making use of a critical discourse approach. 'Approach' is chosen above 'analysis', following advice from Keet (2012:9) who argues that the forms of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis that became popularised by linguists were not really true to the concept as devised by Foucault. In order to avoid criticism about the technical deviation from linguistic methodology or preference for larger scale evidence, I call the form of thematic analysis utilised in this article, a critical discourse approach. Gee (2004:20) acknowledges that such forms of thematic analysis that are not rooted in a linguistic background, but that nevertheless utilise socio-political critique and theory, can still be recognised as critical discourse analysis. My use of 'approach' gives less of an expectation for deep rigour that might be expected by critical discourse analysis purists.

Recognising that these email conversations were language in interaction and therefore political (Gee, 2004:34), I utilised the 'critical' part of the approach, which concerns itself with power relations (Rogers, 2004:3). To do so, the responses were read and re-read to uncover the psychopolitical awareness that participants may hold of the relationships that are shaped by power in their workplace. Following this exercise, the presence of different discourses was determined through the loads of socio-political, economic, racial and psychological content (Rogers, 2004:6) present in the conversations. Lastly, the data were read to determine whether the responses cut across all three structural domains: local, institutional and societal (Rogers, 2004:7).

Findings

In total, nine (28%) of the 32 Black colleagues responded; two females and seven males. The ages of the participants ranged from 26 to 60 years. Participants included seven lecturers and two administrators. Some responded once, and others more than once. Three colleagues responded to the initial invitation, five to the invitation with the Afrikaans note as prompt, and five to the invitation with the emails regarding the tragic incident as prompt. The female colleague with whom I engaged in the email debate preceding the research did not submit any response.

Psychopolitical awareness

It was clear that all participants had an unequivocal understanding of the balance of power in that faculty as favouring White colleagues. Responses such as the following were received: “There is too big a gap between my life-world and that of my white colleagues for them to really understand me”; “The white colleagues don’t have to say it; they send an aura that they regard you as inferior”; “The notice (requesting silence) smacks of subtle racism because cleaners who are lumped together with pets are black; I have never seen a single white cleaner on this campus”. Two colleagues experienced the workplace as a place where, despite the general knowledge about the real power-bearers, “people wear masks” and as a “fantasy place where we have to be nice to one another”.

Discourses

Three strong discourses could be discerned from the responses: a discourse of fear; one of powerlessness, and another of bitterness. One discourse is read from the scarcity of responses: a discourse of non-engagement.

In one school in the faculty there was a pervasive discourse of *fear* as evidenced by: “I suffer in silence as I need the job, even after I’ve been addressed like an animal”; “In the birthday gathering I would not feel free with white colleagues present as they will tell management about our behaviour and discussions”, and “It can probably be regarded as a weakness that I don’t express my opinion in this environment that still does not accept that change has occurred”. This discourse of fear follows from some colleagues’ perceptions of their employment vulnerability as contract workers (“I need the job”) and the sense of being numerically outnumbered as a Black staff member: “It is sad to be reminded of your skin colour in such a negative way in a modern workplace”.

The discourse of *powerlessness* manifests itself in the face of a powerful, transformation-resistant institution that can keep itself exactly as conservative as it wants to be, without interference from outside. Evidencing quotations in this regard are: “White people who are originally from this city are arrogant compared to white people from outside”; “They allow people of colour in their territory for statistical purposes and to ease their conscience”, and “Following the drowning of the student and the insistence that nothing is wrong with the reception practices, I still wonder if this reception programme really adds academic value”.

There is also a discourse of explicit and implicit *bitterness* against the dominant White hegemony: “This notice is a reminder of the complete lack of appreciation for their (cleaning workers’) work and a belief that a black person will always break the rules of civility”; “Where is ‘human dignity’ and all those beautiful words in our code of conduct?”; “Remember that the white student (referred to in a derogatory Afrikaans term, ‘Boer’) died drunk; he is going to hell”, and “When a black person is dead, life goes on for white people” (these last two comments were made after it became known that a church service was organised by campus authority figures for a senior White student who died in a motorcycle accident on campus during the reception programme. This is in contrast to the absence of such a church service for the Black first-year student).

The discourse of *non-engagement* is read from the low number of responses and the fact that I had to use prompts to elicit responses.

Domains

The *local* domain of discourse drew very few responses, as only one participant indicated that “raising difficult issues among colleagues in the academy is in the nature of personal engagement”; “Having these conversations anchors the issues for our personal scrutiny”, and “I disagree with any idea that discards reading and theorising about issues of our immediate concern”.

At the *institutional* level of discourse many examples were found: “I agree with ... [name of a colleague]; this notice is totally contradictory to our faculty’s code of conduct”; “This campus can do with what I remember from my previous employer where we had what we called ‘Fierce Conversations’

as standard institutional practice”, and “[regarding the drowning of the student] The institution lied to us and tried to make us believe every word they said”.

From all the responses it was abundantly clear that colleagues contributed to an awareness of a larger *societal* domain of situatedness. Evidencing quotations that can be offered are: “Was it kept in mind by the organisers of the reception event (where the student drowned) that there are neighbourhoods without swimming pools?”; “After 18 years of democracy this campus finds itself in the same situation in which the dinosaurs found themselves”, and “We want to say we’re proudly South Africans when we can’t properly address or respect one another”.

Discussion

The conversations, as Fairclough (2004:229) confirms, were understood as shaped by the social structure of the faculty within which they were produced. Social practices such as the day-to-day intimations in the workplace and the formal exercise of duties also shaped these conversations.

In line with the critical community psychology prediction, and as expected from educated people taking part in a discussion on such overtly political topics such as race, social justice and reconciliation, the presence of a psychopolitical awareness does not come as a surprise. The racialised nature of the work environment in this study also made the awareness of the unequal racial balance of power in favour of White colleagues inevitable, given the social and political weight that race still carries in South Africa. This finding therefore broadens, rather than deepens, the research field on the nature of racial power relations in South African higher education. It demonstrates that Black staff members in the micro-context of this campus, at least, hold distinctly historical notions of racial power relations because the distribution of power in this institution still mirrors the apartheid-era racial configuration. Although the female colleague, whose email debate with me formed the rationale behind the research, did not participate in the research, her stance regarding racial relations indicates that the Black staff members are not a homogenous group, as far as racial sensibilities and argumentation are concerned. Her stance illustrates the critical community psychology assertion that a community is complex even as the research participants displayed near-uniform psychopolitical awareness about their perception of the lay of the land in their faculty.

The discourses of fear, powerlessness, bitterness and non-engagement present a theoretical challenge because all of them coalesce around negativity, leaving little space for progress. Nothing was even mentioned about reconciliation as a concept or a strategy. Hook (2004:692) offers a way out by his elegant treatment of abjection (Kristeva, 1982:1) in the analysis of racism. He (Hook, 2004:693) acknowledges the intensity of emotions associated with racism. Using this understanding, one can then interrogate the wisdom of conventionally steering away from allowing emotion-laden discussions on topics in the workplace where racism might become a focal point. The reasoning followed by Hook (2004:692) indicates that by *not* steering the data collection more strongly into the terrain of the affective and subjective, I may have missed a stronger attachment to progress than these negative discourses. Nevertheless, human beings have agency in the discourses of which they are a part (Fairclough, 2004:229). At least these discourses, present among Black staff in this faculty, can be read with Keet’s (2012:20) understanding of critique as a growth point for invigoration. The discourses of fear, powerlessness and bitterness are self-explanatory when read against the assertion by Thaver (2003:144) of the South African higher education sector being anchored by the experiences and knowledge of White people, in the main.

The discourse of non-engagement needs a short explication. Writing about strife and pain can be therapeutic (Roodt, 2007:144-145), as it allows more space for reflexivity than active, bodily interaction with others. Non-participation in the email conversations could then be read in different ways, one of which being the inability to reflect on one’s social world through the medium of email writing. Regarding this inference of inability, Van der Merwe’s (2007:19) argument that a strong leaning in favour of vocationalism among some in higher education can be responsible for a disinterested engagement with topics of the nature discussed in this research, is instructive. Marais and De Wet (2009:39) contribute to this argument of inability when they, in the aftermath of the infamous Reitz video at the University of the

Free State, concluded that the intellectual elite displayed many symptoms of being ignorant about issues which fall outside their area of expertise.

This non-participation can also be read as resistance against the topics or against my stance which was widely visible in the pre-research debate. Reading resistance into the discourse of non-engagement is not too implausible when interpreted through the lens provided by Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001:316-319). These authors pose a continuum of four different forms of resistance: reactionary behaviour; self-defeating resistance; conformist resistance, and transformative resistance. The continuum is based on the extent of the critique against oppression, and a concern for social justice. Reactionary behaviour is regarded as devoid of critique against oppression and lacking a concern for social justice. Self-defeating resistance contains some critique of oppressive conditions but the behaviour is not transformative; in fact, it perpetuates stereotypes. Conformist resistance is undergirded by social justice concerns but contains very little critique of oppressive systems, nor does it really aim to change such systems. Conformist resistance is rather prone to blaming the self and the own culture for adverse social conditions. At the progressive end of the continuum transformative resistance contains significant critique of oppression and has a strong concern for social justice.

Drawing on my knowledge as an intimate participant-observer, I interpret the resistance that I read into the participants' discourse of non-engagement as mostly not reaching the transformative part of the continuum of resistance, thus appearing to fluctuate between reactionary behaviour, self-defeating resistance and conformist resistance.

The finding that the discourses featured more prominently in the institutional and societal domains of functioning was also not surprising, since the topics are widely discussed in the world outside the institution and in institutional documents, at least. The prompts that I used were strongly institutional in nature and thus could lead participants to locate the discourse in this domain.

It was surprising to find that the local domain was not much dwelled on, given that the research was located in the local domain of personal, collegial and friendship relations. This finding can probably be explained in much the same way as the discourse of disengagement. The shortage of written responses that could be located in the local domain can be interpreted as unwillingness or even as an inability to speak from the inner, intimate circle and the self, about the issues discussed in the social conversation. In addition, I interpret the scarcity of the local domain location in the discourses as situated on the lower levels of resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001:316), because of the lack of close reflexivity displayed by keeping the conversations at a more distant level than on the personal.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are acknowledged, the chief being the low number of participants and the restriction of the conversations to those of Black staff only. The low number could have had an effect of homogenising the responses. Conversations among White staff at the same institution on the same topics would also produce interesting discourses, confirming or dispelling expectations. Obtaining such conversations is a challenge posed to trusted White participant-observers.

Conclusion

This small-scale ethnography indicates that Black staff members at a historically Afrikaans university campus have a psychopolitical awareness relating to issues of race, social justice and reconciliation when they engage in social conversation. This shows that the staff members who participated are not unthinking, ignorant people who take their psychopolitical environment for granted.

In addition, discourses of fear, powerlessness and bitterness were discerned from the responses; one could reasonably expect this from a group of Black people as a minority in a majority White space. These discourses should sound alarm bells about the kind of psychosocial experiences and environmental climates that can give rise to the construction of fear, powerlessness and bitterness.

The discourse of non-engagement can be interpreted as an expression of agency by those who made conscious choices not to participate, when perceived from a positive angle. However, this discourse can

also be interpreted as a worrying expression of acquiescence which reveals an inability to ignite the own agency.

Given the general visibility of debates on the issues of race, social justice and reconciliation in the institutional and public domains, these discourses were also mainly anchored in those domains. A concerning finding was made about the lack of placement of the discourses in the domain of the local – the personal and immediate relational. This finding can also be read as an expression of disengagement of the personal with the political, contrary to what critical community psychology would expect from people in a position of numerical minority status or even oppression (Prilleltensky, 2001:766).

In closing, I make suggestions which can be considered in an effort to thwart the generally negative discourse because “anger and bitterness cannot be a life a person chooses” (Ratele, 2011:255). I restrict my suggestions to the level of the intrapsychic.

Vice (2010:334), in reflecting on the position of White people in South Africa, suggests an active silence of reflexivity which ponders the moral complexities in racial situations in order to minimise the potential for mistakes in this area. This position is not without its critics. For example, Keet (2011:36) is not convinced about the wisdom of this type of silence as a strategy for White people, because it is so difficult to distinguish from other forms of silence such as resistant silence or patronising tut-tutting. Such critique notwithstanding, I nevertheless suggest, in an inversion of Vice’s (2010:334) logic, that Black staff members, who do not want to engage in overt acts of disruption, can use strategic silence to make “strange what was previously normal” (Vice, 2010:337). For instance, by stopping mid-sentence when a White discussant diverts her attention to attend to the lone White person entering the room, the shame-induced self-vigilance and thinking-twice that Vice (2010:334) advocates for White people, of the ilk as perceived by the Black colleagues in my research, may perhaps take root and lead to greater reflexivity on the part of White staff.

Kristeva (1982:4) holds that “abjection disturbs identity system order”. When applied to this research, I suggest that Black staff closely scrutinise what is so disturbing at an intimate personal or psychic level (Hook, 2004:693), that keeps some from even participating in collegial social conversations about issues of race, social justice and reconciliation. Doing so would bring the uncomfortable truths home, productively directing the focus away from only the distant social aspects of racial injustice. By applying self-critique and social critique, based on the disturbance of the normal channels of identity formation, Black staff members open themselves up for growth opportunities in relation to issues of race, social justice and reconciliation.

For Black staff members to become the organic intellectuals who aim to be respected scholars, as argued by Mahlomaholo and Netshandama (2012:37), they can rather engage in transformative resistance. This form of resistance expects, at once, covert and overt behaviour which provides productive critique of oppressive conditions as the person him-/herself engages in socially just actions (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001:324). Such a form of resistance may even require the adoption of permeable identities in the vein of the “specular border intellectual” (JanMohamed, 1992:114; JanMohamed, 1993:113). This person activates her/his own agency to subvert essentialising positions through deliberate border-crossing into unknown psychopolitical territory (JanMohammed, 1992:118).

Reasoned argumentation and honest deliberation on issues of race, social justice and reconciliation contribute to the ideals of democratic and compassionate citizenship (November, Alexander & Van Wyk, 2010:788; Waghid, 2004:47). By engaging in such deliberation Black staff members may be able to create alternative discourses among themselves, their White colleagues and ultimately their students.

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