

‘The air is hostile...’: Learning from an African International Postgraduate Student’s Stories of Fear and Isolation within a South African University Campus

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Abstract

In this article, we – a research team of academic staff and postgraduate students – take a narrative inquiry stance to explore what we can learn from one African international postgraduate student’s stories of experience on a South African university campus. We use the medium of narrative vignettes – brief evocative scenes or accounts – to re-present data generated through unstructured interviews and collage-making.

Framed through a multiperspectival theoretical lens, the vignettes reveal how the student’s everyday life on campus is constrained by fear of xenophobic harassment and violence. We argue that the setting or backdrop for his learning can therefore be understood as pedagogically unsound, even when effective teaching and learning activities might be seen to be taking place in designated spaces. To conclude, we consider possibilities for cultivating pedagogic settings that are beneficial and safe for all those who learn, teach and live within them.

Keywords: narrative inquiry; vignettes; pedagogic settings; university campuses; African international students; xenophobia; multiperspectival theoretical lens

Preface: ‘You are going to a grave’

In this opening vignette, Jack – a postgraduate student from an African country outside of South Africa – recalls how his arrival at a South African university was preceded by the highly publicised attacks in May 2008 on people perceived as ‘foreigners’:

I knew what I was getting myself into when I opted to study in South Africa. Before I came here I had an idea of what I was going to see. A few months prior to my coming, xenophobia started and the news of xenophobia was everywhere, even in my country we knew about it also. We saw how people were killed and property was destroyed. So, when I decided to come here, people were asking, ‘Why are you going to a place where people are dying? You are going to a grave’. But I still decided to come. I had already prepared my mind. I knew what I was getting into. I prepared myself like a soldier going to a warfront that is conscious of the power of the enemy. I was coming to face the enemy that I already knew about. I knew that in South Africa I must be very careful with the people, and must talk to them in a nice way. I knew that they didn’t like me.

Introduction

Despite the South African Constitution’s (Act 108 of 1996) commitment to ‘heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights’ (Republic of South Africa 1996:1), the internationally acclaimed reconciliation of the post-Apartheid era has been marred by discrimination and aggression against people seen as ‘foreigners’, predominantly black migrants from other parts of Africa (Hadland 2008; Landau *et al.* 2005; Neocosmas 2006). This became particularly evident in May 2008, when violence against ‘foreigners’ – mainly black African migrants – broke out across the country, resulting in more than 60 people being killed and tens of thousands being chased away from their homes and losing their livelihoods (Hadland 2008). The human suffering brought by this widespread violence and intimidation was personified by Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, a 35-year-old Mozambican

migrant worker who was burned alive by a crowd of people in Ramaphosa township on the East Rand. ‘The horrifying photographs of “the burning man” as he became known, were splashed across newspapers around the world, bringing home the barbaric nature of the violence against foreigners’ (Underhill & Khumalo July 2010 online). These are the shocking images that Jack and his friends and family are likely to have seen prior to his arrival in South Africa. And these images would almost certainly have been in his mind as he set about negotiating his way in a new university environment.

These recent events portray South Africa as a hostile and hazardous place for African migrant workers. But, what of African international students? In the wake of the May 2008 violence, one might expect the universities that recruit such students to be highly aware of the fear and anxiety that is likely to accompany them on their journey to South Africa and to be making every effort to ensure that they will experience university campuses as ‘safe havens’ within which to live and study.

According to student enrolment records, our university boasts a strong representation of African international students, registered for a range of postgraduate programmes across different faculties and campuses. While these figures reflect to some extent institutional strategic goals and our status as both an international university and a university that espouses African scholarship, we – a research team of academic staff and postgraduate students – are asking questions as to what lies beyond the statistics to better understand the phenomenon of internationalisation as it is lived and experienced by African international postgraduate students currently in South Africa. The discussion in this article emerges from one of our guiding research questions: ‘What can we learn from African international students’ experiences at our university?’ In the article, we take a narrative inquiry stance to explore what we can learn from the ‘stories of experience’ (Connelly & Clandinin 1990:2) of one student, Jack¹, as related to us through a process of unstructured interviews and collage-making.

In what follows, we begin by highlighting some significant features of the narrative inquiry methodological approach that informs this article. We then give details of our research process. Next, we turn to our data, using

¹ As Jack asked that his nationality not be revealed, we have deliberately given him a pseudonym that is not a common name in his country.

the medium of narrative vignettes – brief, evocative scenes or accounts (Caulley 2008; Humphreys 2005; Kirk 2005) – to ‘[recast the] data into a storied form’ (Coulter & Smith 2009:577). We intersperse these vignettes – which invite the readers to ‘see and hear through the sensibilities and emotions of a focalised character’ (Coulter & Smith 2009:579) – with interpretive discussion, in which we explain how we have drawn on relevant literature to enhance our understanding of Jack’s stories. Next, we consider what we can learn from the vignettes about a university campus as a pedagogic setting. To end, we consider possibilities for fostering a pedagogic setting where stories such as Jack’s will be hard to find.

Although, as a research team, we are located within the broad field of Education, we teach and research within the diverse disciplinary specialisations of Teacher Development Studies, Social Justice Education and Education Leadership, Management and Policy Studies. Consequently, we come from different theoretical locations and, in this article, we are drawing together a variety of ways of thinking to ‘gain the unique insight of multiple perspectives’ (Kincheloe 2001:687) in our endeavour to learn from Jack’s stories of experience.

The Significance of Characters, Storylines and Settings in this Narrative Research Text

To explore Jack’s stories of experience, we have drawn on narrative approaches to researching human experience (see, among others, Barone 2008, 2009; Clandinin 2006; Clandinin & Connelly 1994, 2000; Coulter & Smith 2009). We understand that considering these stories through a narrative inquiry lens requires us to pay close attention to their narrative features or literary elements, such as *characters*, *storylines* and *settings* (Barone 2008, 2009; Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Coulter & Smith 2009). Thus, we position Jack as the *central character* or *protagonist* in this article or ‘narrative research text’ (Clandinin & Connelly 1994:1318). We have deliberately chosen to include only one ‘focalised character’ (Coulter & Smith 2009:579) in this research text in order to take a close-up look at ‘the subjective experience of [this central character] as [he interprets] the events and conditions of [his] everyday [life]’ within a university campus (Coulter

& Smith 2009:578, citing Miller). Our decision follows a precedent set by a number of studies within the narrative inquiry research genre that focus on only one central character or research participant (see, for instance, Beattie 1995; Ciuffetelli Parker 2006; Phillion 2002). In these studies, the aim is not to ascertain the *number* of participants that have had similar or different experiences, but rather to re-present and make meaning from the texture, depth, and complexity of one participant's stories of lived experience.

The *storylines* that are re-presented in this research text are based on Jack's own words, but are re-constructed into narrative vignettes that portray Jack's stories of experience through brief, evocative scenes and accounts (Caulley 2008; Humphreys 2005; Kirk 2005). We have chosen to use the first person voice for the vignettes because, as Coulter and Smith explain, 'in general, a first-person construction lends closeness to the telling: The reader sees the story through the perspective of the character as narrator' (2009:580). We are aware that the form in which we have chosen to re-present Jack's stories both facilitates and influences the meanings that might be made from these stories (Eisner 1997). We are also conscious that because re-presenting data involves making decisions about what to leave out and what to include, the re-presentation that we offer through the vignettes is partial and could have been constructed in other ways (Caulley 2008; Eisner 1997). The use of a narrative device such as vignette to represent data falls within in the genre of 'alternative forms' of data re-presentation 'whose limits differ from those imposed by propositional discourse and number' (Eisner, 1997:5). This work is 'alternative' in contrast to more 'traditional qualitative research reports, [in which] facts are piled on facts, interview quotes are stacked on interview quotes' (Caulley 2008:429). Researchers who use alternative methods of data re-presentation acknowledge the value of facts and interview quotes, but see these as raw material for constructing evocative re-presentations that 'deploy literary devices to recreate lived experience and evoke emotional responses' (Richardson 2000:11).

It is important for us to stress that, while the storylines presented in this article are based on Jack's individual perspectives on and interpretations of aspects of his lived experience on a university campus, this research text is '*not primarily*' about Jack or even about our university (Barone 2009:594). We are interested in exploring how the evocative medium of vignettes might move us and our readers to seek new perspectives on and insights into a

disturbing issue that we might perhaps otherwise rather avoid thinking about (Barone 2008; van Manen 1990). However, Barone (2009:596) cautions that we might find that ‘the best [we] can do is to lure *some* readers on *some* occasions into vicariously witnessing’ Jack’s stories of experience. Nevertheless, he maintains that ‘if the reading experience is sufficiently powerful, it may at least raise “embarrassing questions” (Said 1994) ..., or promote ponderings on what causes the suffering and conversations about how best to alleviate it’ (2009:596). And it is such ponderings and conversations that we seek to evoke through this article.

For the purposes of this narrative research text, our understanding of *setting* is drawn from conceptions of setting as a literary or narrative element (Coulter & Smith 2009). From this perspective, a setting forms the backdrop or surrounding conditions for stories of experience, but it also has considerable bearing on those stories (Clandinin 2006). Thus, in this research, we conceptualise a university campus as the backdrop against or environment within which Jack’s stories of experiences occur. Significantly, viewed through a narrative inquiry lens, a university campus as a setting is not merely a backdrop for a student’s lived experience – it is an intrinsic and influential part of that experience. The vignettes that follow in this article are located outside of designated classrooms or study areas. Nevertheless, in our discussion of what we can learn from these vignettes, we consider their pedagogic significance. This is because, in this article, we view pedagogy not as ‘the science of teaching’ or as a particular approach to teaching and learning, but rather as experiential, formative, and relational learning and teaching processes that can be both formal and informal and that can take place within or outside of official teaching times and teaching venues. We make theoretical connections to humanist and phenomenological perspectives that place the focus of pedagogy directly on people (or characters) and on lived experience (or storylines), emphasising the fundamental significance of human lives, interaction, and relationships in learning and teaching (Allender 2004; van Manen 1990). This ‘multiperspectival’ (Kincheloe 2001:682) view of pedagogy allows us to see a university campus as a setting or backdrop that situates, influences and is influenced by the characters and storylines involved in learning and teaching processes. Hence, we see a university campus as a *pedagogic setting* and we consider what we can learn about such a pedagogic setting from Jack’s stories of experience.

Our Research Process

Jack is one of four postgraduate African international students who have contributed thus far to our research project through participating in a process of unstructured interviews and collage-making. Through this process, we aimed to draw forth the student participants' 'lived stories as data sources' (Connelly & Clandinin 1990:6). Three interviews were conducted with each participant. The first two interviews were of about an hour's duration and the third interview lasted longer because during this interview a collage was compiled. All interviews were conducted on the university campus. The interviews took over a month to complete, because the student participants, who were also working and studying on the campus, had to fit them into their busy schedules.

The unstructured interviews allowed for the generation of rich and vivid data (Gilham 2010). The interviews granted us the space to get 'into the heads' of our student participants to draw out their interpretations of their lived experiences (Cohen *et al.* 2011). Furthermore, unstructured interviews allowed for probing (Brenner 2006; Marshall & Rossman 2006). Probing affords a researcher the opportunity to acquire information that the participants might not have been consciously aware of, and allows deeply concealed beliefs and ideas to emerge (Marshall & Rossman 2006). The following kinds of probes were used in the interviews: *Can you please elaborate. How did this happen? How do you feel about...? Why do you think...? Can you tell me more?* The probing generated supplementary data on the personal experiences and histories of the participants and significant encounters in their lives.

The interviews were accompanied by the use of collage-making (see Butler-Kisber 2008), which was a more participatory approach to eliciting the lived stories of the students. The student participants created collages consisting of pictures and words that connected people and events that they identified as significant to their experiences as international postgraduate students at our university.

Importantly, to enhance the trustworthiness and ethical responsibility of the research process, the participants were asked to verify the accuracy of data that had been generated. In addition, as is common practice in narrative inquiry, they were also involved in the analysis of the data, as significant narrative tensions and patterns emerging from the data were identified and

discussed with each participant (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). Thus, the data analysis was a participatory and inductive process of '[searching] for emerging patterns, associations, concepts and explanations in [the] data' (Nieuwenhuis 2010:107).

It is important to note that the process of the interviews and collage-making was facilitated by members of our research project team who are themselves postgraduate students. Our collective thinking was that the participants might feel more comfortable sharing their stories with fellow students rather than academic staff members. The student researchers did indeed seem to establish a good rapport with the student participants. Significantly, the student researchers' experiences of the interviews and collage-making brought to the fore the emotional dimensions of researching lived experience, as explained by one of our student researchers:

...compiling the collage was a moving exercise as there were times when...the participants became emotional as they compiled the collage with pictures and words that recalled their past and present experiences. As a researcher using collage as a tool for the first time, I realised that no amount of reading on this method can prepare you for reality. When confronted with the participant's emotional breakdown, I was lost for words. The best I could do was to be understanding and respectful to the participants. However, I also realised that the participants just needed an opportunity to release their pent up emotions, and needed a body that would listen to their stories.

Literature on the emotional aspects of researching lived experience (see, for example, Mitchell & Irvine 2008; Pithouse-Morgan *et al.* 2012; Rager 2005a, 2005b) reminds us that it is vital to pay close attention to the emotional impact of the research process, both on the participants and on the researchers. Pithouse-Morgan *et al.* especially 'advise novice researchers and their supervisors to make space and time for paying attention to the emotionality of research, particularly when studying emotionally laden topics' (2012:51). Thus, as this project continues, we plan to seek guidance from an experienced counsellor to ensure that, when working with participants, we will all feel equipped to respond supportively to emotional

issues that might arise, as well as to know when and how to recommend that participants access counselling and support services or to make use of such services ourselves.

Jack's Stories of Experience: 'You can feel the dislike The air ... is hostile'

As sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1959:226) reminds us, 'the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of the individual life'. For us, the three vignettes that follow help us to make 'human meaning' of a university campus as a *pedagogic setting*. As explained earlier on in this article, we have chosen to portray Jack's stories of experience through vignettes told in the first person. Coulter and Smith (2009:580) point out that a limitation of using the first person voice to portray the subjective experience of a central character is that we 'cannot include information that the character would not be privy to'. We are not privy to and thus cannot re-present the subjective perspectives of the other characters who feature in these vignettes. What is re-presented in the vignettes is *Jack's* account and reading of the actions and viewpoints of these characters.

In this first vignette, Jack recounts how his 'home' on the university campus has become a place of fear and isolation for him:

When I arrived at [the university], I was assigned a flat reserved for international students and postgraduate students. This flat is attached to the undergraduate section. The students share a common lounge for watching TV. However, I do not enjoy the luxury of watching TV in that lounge because of an incident that occurred there. I therefore try to avoid that place now. Last year, I had a bad experience. I was here a short while and I was watching soccer in the lounge and a group of guys came in. They were drunk. They wanted to watch *Generations* [a popular local soap opera]. They questioned me on why I was watching soccer instead of *Generations*. So I offered them the TV and told them that they were welcome to watch *Generations* as I did not mind. I was just trying to be polite, knowing how they

felt towards foreigners and that they were hot tempered. But they still became offended. They were angry that I was not watching *Generations*, which was a South African programme. This one guy took his beer and poured his drink on me. He was a first year student and I was in Honours. So I just got up and walked away. From that time, I have not been down to the lounge to watch TV. I did not lodge a complaint. I am muscular and I can defend myself. But I also know if they gang up on me then they can stab or shoot me at any point.

To better understand this vignette, we draw on Soldatova's (2007) analysis of xenophobia as a psychological phenomenon. While xenophobia is commonly understood as a fear of *foreigners* – with 'foreigner' meaning people who come from another place or country – and this is the meaning that has largely been conveyed by the press and social commentators when labelling the violence against African migrants in May 2008 as 'xenophobic attacks', Soldatova describes xenophobia as 'the fear and dislike of certain groups of people' (113) that can be based on a variety of perceived differences, including racial, ethnic, religious, cultural or physical difference. Thus, according to this psychological perspective, the perceived 'foreignness' or 'othering' that is at the core of xenophobia is not limited to being from another place or country. Additionally, Soldatova (112) explains, 'the existence of negative stereotypes in regard to any single group considerably increases the likelihood that negative stereotypes will take shape in relation of other groups too'. Similarly, in the South African context, Neocosmas (2006:129) argues, 'Women, the poor, and ethnic minorities *inter alia* can be regularly subject to such xenophobia (they become the 'other' in the situation)'. Hence, this suggests that although the vignettes portray Jack's stories of experience as an African international student, it is important to bear in mind that similar stories of fear and anxiety might be heard from women students or indeed any students who become the 'other', an object of irrational fear and dislike, in certain situations.

According to Soldatova (2007:107), 'the human propensity to divide the world into *We* and *They* is one of the basic peculiarities of human nature and the central psychological mechanism of xenophobia'. Soldatova explains that this basic human tendency develops into the 'socially dangerous

phenomenon' (119) of xenophobia in situations of heightened social tensions when people feel anxious and unsafe and see others – foreigners of whatever kind – as the cause or embodiment of their anxiety and fear. From this psychological perspective, therefore, experiences of xenophobia would be characterised by 'discrimination, alienation, isolation, confrontation, violence and conflicts' (119) that are related to the perceived 'foreignness' or 'otherness' of certain groups of people.

In the next vignette, Jack goes on to give an account of his anxiety about going near the campus Student Representative Council (SRC) offices – the very place where one might assume students experiencing difficulties could go for advice and support:

I do not like the SRC area. It is a very powerful space. I am very sceptical when I go towards the SRC office. It's a place that instils fear. It's a place where the students identify the things they want and don't want. It's not an official policy that they don't like foreigners. But when you go there it is implied. You can feel the dislike. The air around the SRC building is hostile.

As Jack points out, the SRC offices are a place of power. Sociological research into xenophobia in South Africa (Landau *et al.* 2005; Neocosmas 2006) emphasises that although it is not '*official policy that they don't like foreigners*', places of power such as government offices and police stations are often places of discrimination, harassment and even violence for those seen as 'foreigners', especially black African migrants. From Jack's account, it appears that he has not actually experienced overt harassment or violence at the SRC offices and yet, it is a place that fills him with fear. It is certainly not a place where he has been made to feel welcome or where he might feel able to '*lodge a complaint*' about xenophobic harassment.

In the final vignette, Jack explains that, because of his constant anxiety and fear, his movements around and beyond the university campus are restricted. He reveals that it is only in certain designated learning and teaching spaces that he feels able to drop his guard:

I have adopted some mechanisms to survive at [this university]. There are many spaces within this campus that I am not at ease in. I

am always reminded that I am different. So I choose to just keep quiet. I also ensure that I have the right amount of money that I need when taking a taxi for fear of talking and being found out that I am a foreigner. The only places that I find solace in are my study room at the [university] campus; when I am with my supervisor in his office and when I am in the library.

Viewed from a humanist and phenomenological perspective, human interaction and relationships are fundamental to pedagogy. From this perspective then, a pedagogic setting in which *even one* student's everyday life is constrained by a persistent fear of xenophobic violence is a pedagogically unsound setting for all of us. Nevertheless, while these three vignettes portray only Jack's stories, it is significant that his accounts of living with a fear of xenophobic harassment and violence resonate with the accounts of the other three African international postgraduate students we interviewed. Jack's reading of his experiences also corresponds with accounts given by 10 other African international students studying on a different campus at our university who were interviewed for a recent Masters study (Shabangu 2011). Furthermore, Jack's stories are congruent with findings from research into doctoral education at a range of South African universities which found that international students identify xenophobia as a significant barrier to their academic success (Herman 2011).

What can we Learn about a University Campus as a Pedagogic Setting?

The three vignettes highlight how Jack's reading of aspects of his life on a university campus has resulted in an everyday fear and a feeling of confinement or loss of freedom. Despite his fear and anxiety, Jack has chosen to continue with his studies at our university. The reasons he gave for continuing included learner-centred approaches used in lectures, his positive relationship with his supervisor and access to technology. Accordingly, one might argue that, in pedagogic terms, Jack's experiences at our university are positive. However, if we consider the *pedagogic setting* – or conditions for learning on a broader scale – that is evoked in the vignettes, another picture emerges.

From Jack's stories, it does not appear that he has experienced what might be termed 'serious' physical xenophobic violence. However, the vignettes reveal that he is almost always afraid, anxious and on guard. Similarly, Shabangu's study (2011) 'demonstrates how the fear and threat of xenophobic harassment is a constant feature in the lives of foreign students, and this research highlights how the students do not have to be victims of a xenophobic attack to experience the trauma and anxiety associated with an actual attack' (iv). Feminist psychologist, Maria Root (1989, 1992), describes how an ever-present fear of violence can result in what she terms 'insidious trauma'. As Brown (1995:107) explains, this term 'refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit'.

As well as living in fear, the vignettes demonstrate how Jack's movements around and beyond the university campus are constrained. As far as possible, he limits himself to moving to and from the few spaces where he feels more secure. In a sense, one could say that he is living in captivity. Psychiatrist, Judith Herman (2001), explains that prolonged confinement can result in 'insidious', 'chronic trauma' (86) and she emphasises the 'corrosive psychological effects' (81) of such trauma, chiefly, feelings of 'disempowerment and disconnection from others' (132). If we understand human interaction and relationships as central to pedagogy, then this is indeed cause for concern. Furthermore, from an adult learning perspective, Kerka (2002:para. 2) lists numerous ways in which experiences of trauma can impede learning, including 'difficulty beginning new tasks ... inability to trust (especially those in power), fear of risk taking ... eroded self-esteem/confidence, inability to concentrate'. Thus, what the vignettes bring home to us is that when a student's everyday life on a university campus is infused with fear and unease, the setting or conditions for her or his learning can be understood as pedagogically unsound, even when effective teaching and learning activities might be seen to be taking place in designated spaces.

One might argue that as Jack does not actually seem to have been physically hurt in a xenophobic attack, his subjective reading of events and spaces as xenophobic is an 'overreaction', perhaps fuelled by images such as those of 'the burning man.' In this regard, we find Jenny Horsman's (1997) concept of 'canaries in the mine' a helpful way of understanding possible

implications of Jack's seeming 'overreaction'. Horsman, a literacy educator who studies the impact of violence on learning, explains that the concept of 'canaries in the mine':

helps to shift the unproblematic sense of what is ordinary and healthy, and whose judgment of how serious the violence is should count. Miners carried canaries (or sometimes other birds) into a mine to provide an early warning system for lethal gas. The birds were more sensitive than humans to the gas – low levels were toxic to them. When the birds keeled over, they were not seen as overreacting. Their reaction to the gas was a valuable warning. Even though the miners could not sense the gas, it was present, and they knew they should leave the mine before the levels also became lethally toxic to them (9-10).

Hence, if we recognise Jack's responses as a 'useful warning' that there is something potentially 'lethally toxic' in our pedagogic setting, then rather than dismissing Jack's stories as overreactions, we could see them as an indication that some kind of change might be needed.

Possibilities for Fostering Change in a Pedagogic Setting

The aim of narrative inquiry is not just to generate, re-present and make sense of lived stories. It is incumbent on narrative inquirers to try to learn from these stories in order to envision possibilities for change (Barone 2009; Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Ritchie & Wilson 2000). Thus, here we consult an multidisciplinary range of 'scholarly conversations' (Clandinin & Connelly 2000:136) to consider what we can learn about cultivating a pedagogic setting where stories such as Jack's will be hard to find.

Sociological and psychological research draws attention to the powerful role that can be played by educational programmes in counteracting xenophobia (Hadland 2008; Soldatova 2007). Additionally, sociological and educational researchers such as Neocosmas (2006), Landau *et al.* (2005) and Pearce (1999 cited in Kerka 2002) argue that, while official policy might not be xenophobic or even might be explicitly anti-xenophobic, it is important to acknowledge that 'institutions make personal and structural violence possible

and legitimize it' (Pearce 1999 cited in Kerka 2002: para. 4). In this regard, a sociological understanding of social construction offers insights into the processes and institutions of social formation – in other words, the processes of 'othering', which might contribute to unsound pedagogic settings.

For instance, Harro (2000) has noted the cycle of socialisation in which stereotypical conceptions about different social groups are initiated across different levels of society. The dominant tendency is to set different social identities in oppositional terms by means of affirming one social identity at the expense of disparaging the other. The stereotypical conceptions that cast people who are perceived to be different (or 'foreign') in oppositional and inequitable relationships are normally reinforced at a personal level (through friends and close family members), an institutional level (school, university policies and practices) and a societal level (societal rituals, language use and so on) (Jackson & Hardiman 2000). Jack's lived stories suggest a conception of himself as belonging to a different, albeit denigrated, social group – foreign African students. It is this 'foreigner' social location, and its positionality within dominant discourses within South Africa that seem to generate anxiety, especially given the xenophobic attacks directed towards African migrants. So the challenge for us as a university community is, how can we re-imagine our pedagogic settings in ways that counteract negative and devaluing societal constructions in South Africa regarding 'others', such as 'foreign' African students?

One way would be to do everything possible to ensure that none of our students (or staff) experiences any form of what Young (2000:100) terms the 'five faces of oppression', which she identifies as 'marginalisation, exploitation, violence, cultural imperialism and powerlessness'. Young's argument is that these are the characteristic features of any forms of human injustice, such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and that one or more of these faces are present in any oppressive context. Jack's stories illustrate that, at the very least, he experienced one of these faces of oppression: a sense of powerlessness in respect of fearing university structures such as the Student Representative Council, which is meant to protect the interests of all students. This indicates a need to not only address these issues within the official teaching curriculum, but more importantly within the broader pedagogic settings of our institution. To do this would entail explicitly anti-xenophobic educational programmes, aimed at

challenging the ‘othering’ of any members of our university community and building what Young (2011:x) calls a ‘community of communities’, in which human beings can enjoy social differentiation without the need for violence, marginalisation and exclusion and in which individuals have not only the equal rights of liberalism but also an equal right to flourish as human beings.

From another perspective, discursive theorists (Foucault 1986; Burr 2000, Weeden 1999) argue for the need to focus on discourse as a critical variable in the processes of social identity formation. Because discourse is a means by which we organise our ways of behaving, interacting, valuing and thinking (Bharuthram 2006), this could play a vital role in supporting educational programmes for the creation of anti-xenophobic pedagogic settings. Unfortunately, most current dominant discourses are hegemonic (Connell 2000) and premised on unjust and inequitable social relations (Harro 2000). This means that doing nothing about the xenophobic experiences illustrated in this study would only serve to maintain the status quo. Hence, we maintain that educational programmes that attempt to foster alternative discourses regarding ‘foreign’ African students, and other forms of social difference could be used to support just pedagogical settings.

Nonetheless, we also take note of how critical sociologists (Renold 2005; Mohanty 1992; Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000; McNay 2000) dispute the taken-for-granted forms of power inequalities propagated by conceptions that regard individuals (for instance, ‘foreign’ African students) as victims of the structural social identity formations. These theorists uphold the notion that xenophobic experiences are re/produced by social relations, which constrain, but do not fix, individual action and identity. The idea of experience as having both ‘discursive’ and ‘embodied’ aspects (McNay 2000:25) means that individuals have the ability to interpret experience in fluid and diverse ways. This fluidity could be understood as a source of agency with the potential for those who are ‘othered’ to challenge and possibly change inequitable social relations in our institutions. However, within contexts where social inequalities take the form of life threatening violence, the possibilities for agency might be limited. Creating a conducive and fear-free environment for all students to have a decent quality of academic and social experience and to be equitably valued and affirmed regardless of their nationality and race would be an important goal in this regard.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, we have taken a narrative inquiry approach to exploring what we can learn about a university campus as a pedagogic setting from one African international student's stories of aspects of his everyday life within the campus. As a multi-disciplinary research team, considering Jack's stories through a multiperspectival theoretical lens has allowed us to gain insight into the disturbing issue of student experiences of xenophobia on a university campus and to see that Jack's 'personal troubles cannot be solved merely as [his] troubles, but must be understood in terms of [the] public [issue]' (Mills: 1959:226) of fostering pedagogic settings that are nourishing and secure for all those who learn, teach and live within them.

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