

## Diversity and research practices among academics in South African universities: race for the market

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*Higher education systems, globally, are being called upon to effect changes in terms of widening student access and diversifying a previously homogenous academic staff profile. In South Africa, one of the main forces driving the diversification of academic staff is state policy in the form of employment equity legislation, with racial redress serving as one of the main elements. Legislation of this nature together with other associated policy initiatives are in turn being interpreted and acted upon by higher education institutions in varying ways. At a third level, the intra-institutional or micro-level, individual academics of all races are under pressure to modify and adapt their daily practices and to align them more closely, not only with wider state and institutional imperatives but also with increasingly insistent market forces. The ways in which academics are responding to these pressures for greater diversity, specifically at the level of their research practices, is the primary focus in this article. I explore the effects of the changing conditions of scientific inquiry and highlights contestations arising around the validity of knowledge problems. My overall finding, that the intensive market-logic environment either draws on or eclipses the equity and diversity imperatives, raises questions about how further to address the traditional and conservative social relations that remain so characteristic of the academy.*

**Keywords:** academia; difference; diversity; equity; higher education; research; South Africa

### Introduction

The expansion of higher education across the globe, brought on by pressures from consumers, governments and industry, has generated substantial debate over the shape of universities' student and academic staff components. The academic profession across the world is faced with multiple challenges insofar as its homogenous demographic profile is under pressure to open itself up to more diverse social categories (Enders, 2001; Altbach, 2003; Thaver, 2006a; McDonough & Fann, 2007; Antonio & Muniz, 2007). South Africa is no different. As the country moves to deepen the democratic process ushered in during the mid-1990s, its higher education institutions are expected to modify themselves according to several legislative and policy reforms that have as their aims the establishment of a more diverse community of academics (see, *inter alia*, White Paper, 1997; Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998; National Plan for Higher Education, 2001). All these reforms emphasise the need to transform, and render more representative and equitable, the demographic profiles of both staff and students. Much of the debate so far has revolved around 'getting the numbers right', and there has been little research on what is happening in people's — especially academics' — daily lives and experiences. In this article I seek to begin to address this gap, by probing how academics are navigating their way through these systemic equity- and diversity-related changes *on the ground* (Rhoades, 2007:124, my emphasis).<sup>1</sup>

Current trends suggest that *structural equity-related reforms*, at both national and international levels, are increasingly being treated as interchangeable with *strategies intended to improve diversity*, which are in turn premised on how *difference* is conceptualised (see Agocs & Burr, 1996). The term *diversity* is increasingly used within organisational and management discourses to refer to ways in which institutions seek to integrate and manage those individuals and groups not fully represented within them. Diversity is thus closely associated with strategies targeting sections of a population

that are not part of the social mainstream. In this process, those who fall outside of the norm within an organisation are singled out as representing what is 'diverse', thus being 'different' or 'other', and as such needing to be *managed*; hence the organisational discourse of 'managing diversity' (Agocs & Burr, 1996). Diversity as a strategy or means of implementation nevertheless has two facets. On the one hand, it is oriented around a notion of 'treatment': insofar as the dominant group needs to learn special ways of understanding and responding to the presence of the *other*, a range of training interventions have as their aim the promotion of awareness of difference, empathy for those who are 'different', and instruction in how to "identify and confront stereotypes about persons whose characteristics differ from their own" (Agocs & Burr, 1996). On the other hand, in what can be defined as a co-simultaneous process, diversity involves training the *other* in *how to fit in*, and in becoming integrated into the *status quo* (Agocs & Burr, 1996). To the extent to which the *other* is deemed to be insufficiently developed, there is a sense in which the approach takes a modernizing and linear developmental trajectory, with those representing the dominant norm both assuming, and being invested with, the role of shepherding the *other* through progressively higher 'stages' of development. Accompanied by discourses of assimilation, integration, recognition and celebration, this latter facet of diversity interventions predominates in South African corporate approaches to managing a diverse workforce, which in addition tend to emphasise economic performance (Human, 1996).

Underpinning all these strategic approaches to diversity is the notion of *difference*. Difference in the social sense has been conceptualised in a number of different ways (Brah, 2000). One way views difference as arising from the experiences of social categories that are set up in binary terms, such as women/men or black/white. Another way refers to difference in the form of differential social relations of power as these imbricate themselves in particular social structures. A third way refers to the subjective aspects of difference, and its implications for processes of identity formation. For the purposes of this article, difference is explored in all of these discursive senses, in an effort to understand how each of them is part of and helps to constitute the overall conditions under which knowledge production takes place. Thus, *difference* is here understood as concerned simultaneously with multiple modes of personal being and with the varying forms and degrees of social power embodied by individuals (specifically, black and white academics), all of which assume particular meanings in specific structural contexts (such as higher education institutions).

Whether the terms diversity and difference are deployed negatively in relation to each other (for instance, where diversity is seen as undermining difference) or positively (where diversity is seen as affirming difference), in both instances the prevailing *strategies intended to improve diversity* are conceptualised through an economic lens in which a market-logic predominates (De Los Reyes, 2000; Mohanty, 2006; Goduka, 1996). The terms diversity and difference thus receive substantial sustenance from a social context that is becoming increasingly market-defined, and this in turn tends to go against the grain of the traditionally collegial value sphere of the academic profession (Johnson, 2006:62). Academic collegialism can be seen as an aspect of the vocation of the academic in the Weberian sense, which is "grounded in the imperatives of clarity, intellectual integrity and the project of fashioning the world as a 'cosmos of truth' based on discursive reasoning" (Oakes, 2003:601). At the beginning of the 21st century, this ideal is being laid siege to by the logic of the capitalist market, with academics and higher education institutions alike under pressure to maximize their 'competitive advantages', 'mobilise their resources' and engage in 'competitive practices' (Oakes, 2003:602).

In the light of the current tendency for discourses of difference and diversity to fall under the sway of market forces (Mohanty, 2006; see also Mahlck & Thaver, 2008), I explore the extent to which these discourses and associated practices have altered the conditions by which black and white academics engage in research, constitute their objects of research inquiry, and compete and/or collaborate over scarce research resources such as funding, time and student assistance. In focusing on such micro-level academic responses to the Employment Equity imperative, it aims to disentangle the discursive threads of diversity and difference within what is otherwise assumed to be a universalist normative discourse free from bias, conflict and competition.

**Table 1.** Gender and racial breakdown

Site	Gender				Race								Total	
	Male		Female		African		Coloured		Indian		White			
A	10	66%	5	34%	2	13%	4	27%	1	7%	8	53%	15	100%
B	11	92%	1	8%	1	8%	5	42%			6	50%	12	100%
C	12	92%	1	8%	2	15%	3	23%	1	8%	7	54%	13	100%
D	11	85%	2	15%	13	100%							13	100%
E	2	25%	6	75%	6	75%	1	12.5%			1	12.5%	8	100%
Total	46	75%	15	25%	24	40%	13	21%	2	3%	22	36%	61	100%

The data, on which this article draws, derive from a qualitative research study, undertaken in 2004, of the deracialization of academic staff at five universities in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Sixty-one semi-structured interviews, using a purposive sampling method (Neuman, 1991), were conducted with academic staff, whose gender and racial breakdown are shown in Table 1.

Interviewees were questioned about their responses to the employment equity reform — with its implied diversity discursive narrative — at their institutions, and particularly about its effects on academic research practices. In this article I foreground discourses of race as these surfaced in an overview of the data related to research practices. At this point, let me state that my intention is not to provide a statistical audit of all responses, nor is it suggested that the sample is either statistically or institutionally representative (as Table 1 shows, interviewees were not evenly distributed by gender, race or institutional location, and together they represented barely 2% of the total number of permanent academic staff at the five institutions at the time). Rather, my main purpose in this article is to explore the surface-level racialised experiences of academics as they engage in research practices in an effort to understand how the conditions for the knowledge production process are constituted in and through difference. In peeling off elements of what could be termed “sense-certainty” data (see Singer, 1983), I seek to theorise, in a suggestive way, their implications for a knowledge production process that is assumed to be universalistic and meritocratic, as outlined earlier.

### **Processes for the construction of scientific inquiry**

The function of research is becoming increasingly important in South African academia. Academics are under pressure to participate in reputable research networks and, above all, to generate accredited and highly ranked publications, if they wish to receive (or maintain their current level of) research subsidies; there is also pressure on them to engage in or with policy research. This combination of pressures creates tensions, not least of which is the need to manage workloads and to allocate enough time to each of these researching, networking and publishing requirements, as well as to teaching and administration. In turn, these factors influence what kind and type of research investigations are possible, and foster a very competitive academic environment (Enders, 2001) not unlike other forms of labour markets (Oakes, 2003). While noting that these pressures are part of an international trend (Enders 2001:17), in South Africa they take on somewhat of a racial slant.

An overview of the data reveals contradictory perceptions around the allocation of time required for conducting research. For example, black academics perceive “limits being placed on the time that one has to conduct research”, while white academics posit the same conditions and rules as being “fair”, i.e. normal and standardised. In the referencing there are discursive practices at work, some of which have wider implications for the diversity project at the micro-level. In action, are two connected sets of binary discourses, namely, victim/victor—entitlement/forfeiture. The elements within each binary tend to move in different directions and while the more obvious is the oppositional one, of interest to me are their parallel movements. In this respect, there is a Mertonian universalism that refers to the judgement of knowledge claims without reference to social bias (Merton, 1973). The perception of the ‘fairness regarding the rules of the game’ seems to run alongside a perception in which there is a strong attachment of social bias, with a zero-sum outcome. Consequently, therefore, a tension remains in terms of the need (or not) of stretching knowledge beyond the limitation of the social context (see Goldfarb, 2005:286). The parallel movement of the discourse reflects the differences arising in the experiences of the social categories that have been set up in binary terms.

These discursive tensions are harnessed and fuelled by the competitive market environment conditions brought to bear on the knowledge production process. Students whose thesis research is directly related to that of academics help provide these academics with technical assistance to troubleshoot and test scientific problems. Student assistants’ significant role in the research produc-

tion process means that there is often a scramble to secure postgraduate research assistants:

*There is intense competition among academics for securing masters and doctoral students, at times resulting in cutthroat strategies and behaviours.*

There are three elements at work in the statement above: competition, mentioned earlier; the allocation of research assistants from the pool of postgraduate students; and the intensity and ruthlessness displayed by individual academics as a result of the two previous elements. The diversity imperative tends to coincide with an economic thrust, insofar as academics are struggling among each other for a “competitive advantage in a brutal and unforgiving market” (Oakes, 2003:601). In this respect, the accumulation and mobilisation of resources are the techniques for “maximising one’s chances for successful competition as quickly as possible” in an academic world (Oakes, 2003:602). In this vein, it seems to me that when these conditions are mapped onto the legacy, the effects of differential access are further reproduced among the social categories.

In South Africa, the structural legacy and inherited racial shape of higher education institutions and their academic staff profiles imply different levels of socialisation and varied experiences of academic life, including notions of homeliness and belonging (Thaver, 2006). In this context, resources play no small part insofar as the degree of access to, or allocation of, resources, and the uneven weighting of research, teaching and administrative functions, are key indicators of academics’ preferences (Rhoades 2007; Schuster & Finkelstein 2006). Within this framework and cushioned by experience arising from lengthy institutional immersion, established academics have made choices as to how they wish to cultivate themselves. By contrast, the newer entrants are required to become researchers without the “experience of having acquired the rules of the (research) game”. In this regard, one of the findings suggests that they may lack the experience and socialisation that arise through institutional immersion, to be more strategically calculating in terms of the distribution of value and economy required for the different types of knowledge production and distribution of effort that accompany the process (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). From this it often follows that the function of teaching (and, in certain instances, administration) is foregrounded over the function of research productivity. In turn, newer or inexperienced entrants tend to assign less of their time to the task of acquiring the skills and habits of research production. Arguably, this results in a self-fulfilling prophecy regarding the role and ability of black and/or women intellectuals to fully engage as knowledge producers. It seems to me that the diversity factors arising from the legacy are operating within an environmental context marked by an intense market logic commanding the strategic management of decision-making around resource allocation. In the light of this, any potential risks need to be minimised by “subjecting each decision to careful and ruthlessly opportunistic cost/benefit calculations” (Oakes, 1996:604).

Another condition necessary for fruitful engagement in the research inquiry process is access to and participation in academic collegial practices. Commonly, academic work arrangements are strongly influenced by principles of shared authority and notions of good faith. By implication, therefore, *critical support* and *interest* among individual academics are particularly important for the intellectual work of all colleagues, not least given the significance of peers and peer-assessment in the scientific validation process. However, the findings indicate that in certain disciplines, such as the humanities, there is a lot of ambivalence around these informal practices, particularly with regard to collegial intellectual support for research conducted by black academics, and especially when the inquiry does not depart from a white, western and male epistemic norm. The significant point here is that the notion of ‘collegiality’ in its abstract form, based on a conflict-free principle (see Baldrige, 1971) is taken to operate, despite any social differences embodied by the *collegium*. In other words, collegiality then occurs through the erasure (or bracketing) by individual academics of any differences arising from social relations of power. One question arising here, and which could be the focus of further research in different sites, is the extent to which the historical conditions of racial separation, not to mention those of patriarchal domination (both of which are subsumed under the rubric of *diversity*) have become an ‘unspoken discourse’ limiting the nature of academic interaction and influencing the traditional forms of collegiality (also see Mabokela & Magubane, 2004).

## Contestations around the validity of a knowledge problem

After having identified a research problem, the next crucial stage is to secure material support for conducting the research. It is here, in the peer review process, that the diversity complex and its contradictory challenges around judgement *vis-à-vis* the value and depth of scientific problems that warrant investigation unfold. These have to do with contestations around what is a researchable topic. Some of the findings suggest that research topics with an African orientation tend to be accorded less value than those with a European focus. More specifically, research topics with a more global (as opposed to a local or African) orientation, and which include the deployment of apparently more objective and rational (read as positivist) techniques, have higher currency. This is evident in an instance cited by a black respondent, who wished to research the topic of Indigenous Knowledge production by utilising a localised narrative technique. Leaving aside the fact that national academic approaches to scientific problems are increasingly caught up in pre-existing social relations that define the academy internationally, and that academic practices in universities of the South are closely tied to research models and epistemological agendas that arise in the North (Altbach, 2002), in South Africa the validation of knowledge problems is not only a particularly eurocentric process but also one which is interwoven with a race-based narrative.

This white superiority/black inferiority binary with regard to the ways in which academics approach the justification of certain scientific problems is an indication of an unconscious acceptance of what could be termed a 'white, western, male norm' in the validation process. For example:

*It does not matter whether the white person is not contributing to the overall pool of knowledge; the contribution is valorized, which is less the case with black faculty.*

The above quotation suggests a perception that quality, standards or excellence are somehow embodied in white academics and their practices, but not in black academics. These notions of value are calculated on the basis of unconscious racialised schemas that tend to ascribe higher premiums to the voices of white academics. Further intertwined with gender and geography, a 'Eurocentric norm' (also see Harding, 1986) becomes one element of a racialised knowledge framework (Goldberg, 2000) for identifying and validating not only what constitutes a scientific problem, but also who is scholarly fit to conceptualise and execute the investigation. In the light of this, it was found that the research focus of Indigenous Knowledge production took "a long time to be recognized when the voice that carried it was black". In other words, there is a sense in which the structural racial sensibility has inured itself in the individual, culminating in the notion of difference as being psychically constituted (Brah, 2000). This lengthy process also gave rise to the perception that black academics are judged especially rigorously in terms of the

*extent to which there is sufficient evidence to show that the proposed topic has drawn on the available literature.*

By contrast, there was a perception that, when a white voice carried the topic, it was "recognized a lot quicker". The implication is that the white voice automatically — or at least more closely — embodies the normative rules required for generating an idea. Thus, there appears to be a tension around the standards being used to evaluate the extent to which the *what* (the knowledge topic), the *how* (the methods used) and the *who* (the academic agent) constitute scientific authority.

## Reflections

A few elements worthy of further reflection have emerged from this study. These are the limits of a binary framework of thinking; the coincidence of the implementation of the equity reform and managerial/corporate type social relations; the shape of the diversity discourses; and state steerage in terms of research production arrangements.

At a surface level, the experiences of black and white academics as these arise in the scientific inquiry are different. This is manifested through the direction in which the discursive elements of the white/black binary construct travels along parallel lines. At a deeper level, though, the question is about the extent to which these experiences, expressed in binary racial constructs, are mediated

by factors that are both within and beyond race. This study has shown that the binary dichotomy that steered the investigation, limits the possibilities of seeing any other forms of differential racisms which occur within the categories 'black' and 'white'. This orientation has also constrained a surfacing of three other variables that shape the 'experiences' of academics, namely, gender, rank, and age seniority. Perhaps, this is where the diversity discourse yields a possibility for thinking in more multiple and varied ways. However, any further thinking cannot be abstracted from its context, which brings me to a further reflection.

The intrusion of the equity reform with its diversity imperative is occurring within a context of managerial creep, a phenomenon that manifests itself, if rather unevenly, at all South African universities and no doubt internationally as well (Cloete, Maassen, Fehnel, Moja, Gibbon & Perold, 2002:120,150; Kulati & Cloete, 2003:241; also see Bundy, 2005). In this study, a revealing phenomenon is that this managerial impulse is not only external (i.e. as being imposed from outside), but is also within the academic project. In light of this, as academics seek to find what is termed 'competitive advantage' from both within and among disciplines, they engage in decisions of the order that maximise the allocation of resources. This contradicts the notion of academia as being a 'value-sphere' (with its conflict-free discourse of collegiality), but instead is "an industry, with academics as proprietors of micro-enterprises who struggle for competitive advantage in an unforgiving market" (Oakes, 2003:601). As academia increasingly takes on the shape of a corporate and private sector enterprise, so the issue of diversity management, alluded to earlier, takes centre stage, begging the question of the shape of the discourses.

As outlined earlier, the diversity discourse in private sector organizations is densely marked by both assimilation and essentialised discourses. In this study, some of the thick descriptive data suggest that these texts are also at work in academia, in certain ways. At one level, the essentialised one (arising from the historical legacy) is fairly obvious given the racial white/black binary construct of social categories with its attendant and oft-stated opposition between diversity and scientific excellence (Maher & Thompson Tetreault, 2006). What is increasingly becoming clearer, though, is an assimilation discourse that seeks to contain the knowledge project within a eurocentric sensibility. This is exacerbated by the fact that the academic staff at previously advantaged institutions of higher education remain predominantly white and male (Mkhwanazi & Baijnath, 2003:107-109; Cloete, Maassen, Fehnel, Moja, Gibbon & Perold, 2002:172). In this regard, epistemic differences (arising from non-western norms) are either flattened or subordinated to that of the eurocentrism or serves as a function for the latter. It is important to note that this assimilationist/integrationist text is fuelled by global pressures in the knowledge economy. It seems to me that the diversity text with its multifaceted dimensions is not operative here insofar as the dominant norm remains intact.

Given those elements that tend to place limits on optimising the conditions necessary for scientific inquiry, there are potentially more positive influences at work, arising from global and state-based funding strategies. In certain disciplines, traditional and pastoral ways of conducting research are beginning to come under pressure, and instead there is a trend towards team-based research. The latter has significance especially in those disciplines that are traditionally not marked by such team-based production arrangements. This latter trend is fuelled by certain funding criteria currently being mandated by some donor agencies, emphasizing group or collective expertise in research projects. The National Research Foundation in particular strongly encourages white and black academics to undertake collaborative research, to the extent that this is becoming a condition for the allocation of funding and other research resources. This shift from a research style that is private and individualized to one that is more public and team-based is also an international trend (Scott, 2003). It follows that traditional research production arrangements may be reconfigured in ways that are more inclusive and publicly accountable. In other words, the creation of such conditions has unifying potential with regard to the generation of collective ideas. Moreover, in this way, black and white academics will not, as individuals, have to bear the weight of the historical racial legacy.

## Conclusion

The diversity initiative (as an expression of the structural reform of equity) is influencing the academic practices of research enquiry. This influence is evident in the intensive competition among academics for resources; differential access to, and different degrees of socialisation into, academic practices and academic cultures and contestations over what constitutes valid research. This is occurring within a micro-level context in which the work practices of both black and white academics show traces of a globally defined market-type logic. Of significance is that as the market becomes more hostile and competition intensifies, the narrow racial (black/white) binary drawn on in this study may widen, surfacing differential racisms and stereotypes within these respective categories. In this respect, while the strength of the diversity text is that it cuts through the fixed and essentialised categories (in this instance, race), it simultaneously tends to silence the structural effects of the legacy, as has become evident in this research study. Perhaps, there is a space for dialogue and engagement among academics about the traditional (possibly even, pre-modern) relations that currently define the scientific (i.e. academic) enterprise. In this way, the academy may be able to facilitate a deepening of the democratic project.

## Notes

1. I acknowledge the collaboration with my research partner, Paula Mahlck, from the University of Stockholm.
2. I thank all members of the project team and participants. The project team adhered to the Code of Ethics adapted from the British Educational Research Association's revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, 2004. The set of ethical guidelines, including the information and consent sheets, were approved by the Senate Research Committee at the University of the Western Cape. All participants were informed of the nature of the project and consent was obtained for the public dissemination of the findings.

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