COPING WITH RACISM: EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF THE POST-APARTHEID GENERATION OF BLACK STUDENTS AT AN HISTORICALLY WHITES-ONLY UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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This study explored how the post-apartheid generation of Black students cope with institutional racism and overt acts of racism at an historically Whites-only university. The experiences reported by Black students indicate that racism can manifest in various forms across different aspects of their lives. These experiences encompass institutional, academic, social, and emotional realms of their lived realities. N=6 Black students were interviewed to explore their experiences of racism and their coping mechanisms, using semi-structured interviews. A transcendental phenomenological research design underpinned the study in its focus on the shared lived racial experiences of post-apartheid Black students in an historically Whites-only university. Thematic analysis (TA) was used as a method of data analysis to elucidate these experiences. To align with the aim of the study, the analysis of gathered data employed a thematic approach grounded in social stress theory. The findings reveal that overt acts of racism and institutional racism perpetually afflict Black students, in post-apartheid South Africa. Five themes, and one overarching theme of coping defences were generated: academic determination, boldness, physically and emotionally escaping, faith, support, and inclusion. Fundamentally, the findings demonstrate that Black students adopt both adaptive and maladaptive defences of coping with their experiences of racism, with perpetual psychological costs to their emotional and academic functioning.

Keywords *Racism; post-apartheid; 'born-free' Black generation; coping with racism; historically Whites-only University, social stress theory.*

1. Introduction

In 1948, under the apartheid regime, the South African government implemented a system that legitimised segregation, discrimination, and oppression of any South African citizen not considered by the government to be White[1] (Durrheim et al., 2011). Prior to the constitution of apartheid, South African universities were already divided along racial and ethnic lines (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2010). Whites-only universities comprised English-and-Afrikaans language institutions, whilst the University of Fort Hare was reserved for Black students (Spaull, 2013). These are now known as historically White universities and historically Black universities (Heleta, 2016). Historically, the tertiary education system was arranged in such a

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[1] The convention in English is to capitalise proper nouns and not to capitalise natural kinds. I chose to capitalise the racial categories mentioned in this study because race in this sense is not a natural category, but a social one (Appiah, 2020).

way that the historically Black universities reinforced the agenda of the apartheid government, focussing on qualifications and skills that produced labourers for the state (Ramoupi, 2014), while, according to Kessi (2013), the purpose of the historically White universities was to educe and protect White supremacy. Evidently, education was a tool utilised to perpetuate racialisation, thereby maintaining White supremacy through marginalisation (Kessi, 2013).

Marginalised access to education was made constitutional through the Bantu Education Act (Act 47 of 1953) which imposed a substandard quality of education on Black people, resulting in unequal social and economic standing compared to the White population (Albertus & Tong, 2019). This intergenerational unequal socio-economic standing would later be evident in a #FeesMustFall movement initiated by a majority of the Black student population across South African universities (Bosch, 2016). Although South Africa is no longer governed by the racist laws which existed during apartheid, racism is still evident at South African universities (Puttick, 2011). A study by Murugesu (2020) corroborates South African universities' ineffectiveness in addressing racism on campuses thus, perpetuating institutional racism. It is therefore essential to explore the post-apartheid Black generation's experience of racism, to elucidate how this generation copes with continued overt indignities of institutional racism at an historically Whites-only university.

Following South Africa's first non-racial election in April 1994, the new Government of National Unity began calling on the country's universities to abandon the past and commit themselves collectively to the goal of national reconstruction (Lemanski, 2004). However, when the apartheid era ended, university policy was in disarray, because of factionalism within the state and a lack of political will on the part of officials (Lemanski, 2004). Thus, institutions of higher learning remained largely racist and fragmented, and therefore ill-equipped to meet the challenges requiring an equitable and integrated post-apartheid system of higher education. In 2014 Black students at Stellenbosch University had a dehumanising experience when derogatory terms used to describe Black persons during the apartheid era were written on their residence doors (Isaacs, 2020). Another publicised racial incident occurred at Stellenbosch University where a white student deliberately urinated on a black student's laptop (Modise, 2020). This event serves as evidence of the ongoing racial tensions and conflicts within the campus community, as supported by previous research. These are some of the overt acts of racism meted on Black students because of their race (Elias, 2016), with which they need to cope in addition to their academic demands.

Despite these harsh realities, a study by Kessi and Cornell (2015) revealed that the reason Black students endured the alienation and misery of racial discrimination was due to the perceived opportunities a degree from an historically Whites-only university will afford them. It is apparent that policies have failed Black students in enforcing the cultivation and implementation of a racially integrative community at historically Whites-only institutions of higher education. Despite constitutional gains made, continued acts of overt and covert racism are a microcosm of deeply embedded institutional racism (Kamanga, 2019), underlying the experiential reality of Black students studying at an historically Whites-only university. Therefore, advocating for social justice and equality remains a prominent focal point in South Africa's higher education system (Bosch, 2016). Although by virtue of having been born after 1994, free from the formalised legal apparatus of apartheid, this presumed 'born-free' Black generation continually expresses levels of frustration regarding missed opportunities due to

racial disparities resulting in lack of quality education, inequality, and poverty similar to, if not greater than, their parents' generation (Mattes, 2012).

In their study of experiences and perceptions of race and racism at the University of Cape Town, Erasmus and De Wet (2011), found that Black students reported feelings of self-doubt and intimidation when they related to White students. White students acknowledged reservations on the part of Black students in lecture halls and suggested that Black students should engage more in academic settings (Erasmus & De Wet, 2011). This stems from a reductionist cognitive and emotional engagement with racial marginalisation perpetuated in universities inside campus, residences and lecture halls. Heleta (2016), argues that Black students' silence is a result of an oppressive and victimising academic environment. Supporting this view, Wang and his co-authors (2011) suggest that low self-esteem can result in psychological issues and can negatively impact one's emotions, causing depression and anxiety, and thus permeating other areas of students' functioning. In addition to low self-esteem, research reveals that racial discrimination within institutions of higher education is significantly related to adverse academic outcomes, including poor academic performance, and high dropout rates (Joorst, 2019). The adverse functionally encumbering consequences of racism serve as a clear indicator that regardless of a diversified population at South African universities, institutional practices maintained at historically Whites-only universities continue to perpetuate feelings of alienation (Murugesu, 2020).

Therefore, given the unremitting experiences of racism the post-apartheid Black generation of students endure, their coping cognitive and emotional adaptations need to be detailed and understood by taking into account the social and institutional conditions which created them, and the hostile racial climate which allows such conditions to flourish (Brondolo et al., 2009). The psychological and academic burden due to persistent patterned systemic racial inequalities existing in tertiary institutions (Priest et al., 2011), compels the obligation for continued research on how Black students cope in historically Whites-only universities.

2. Social stress theory

Two guiding assumptions from the social stress theory are that the effects and consequences of racism include greater vulnerability to a variety of social stressors, and that a significant number of reported ways of coping with racism arise, directly or secondarily, from differences in vulnerability to stress (Brondolo et al., 2009). According to Jackson et al. (2010) continual exposure to racism rooted in apartheid can elicit profound and complex traumatic stress responses among Black individuals.

To this end, in his study, Williams (2018) found that Black participants reported higher levels of psychological distress than White participants and concluded that this was significantly associated with the experience of chronic discrimination. Additionally, literature has demonstrated a link between discrimination and psychological well-being (Ayalon & Gum, 2011). Accordingly, three consequential outcomes of discrimination are psychological distress, low life satisfaction, and a sense of social exclusion.

Discouragingly, it is revealed by researchers such as Leath and co-authors (2019) that Black students continue to articulate poorer levels of social and personal-emotional adjustment at historically White South African universities. Consistent with previous research, lack of academic and racial transformation influenced the level of adjustment of Black students

(Leath et al., 2003). Social stress theory purports that due to a lack of sufficient psychosocial coping resources to modulate the effects of continuous racism, individuals become susceptible to psychological distress (Anderson, 2013). As authors our epistemological stance of tempered realism does not imply or suggest that the post-apartheid generation of Black students should bear a psychological burden of victimhood. Such an interpretation would erroneously lean towards accepting and pardoning racism as an inexorable status quo.

Social stress theory conceptualises racism as a social stressor, which can produce negative consequences for 'Other-ed' racial groups (Anderson, 2013). Racial discrimination and racism, which were the order of the day in the apartheid era, are still prevalent in historically Whites-only universities and are still prominent societal stressors (Jackson et al., 2010). Social stress theory posits that a stressful environment and life experiences can impair a person's capacity to cope (Mossakowski, 2014). Consequently, historically Whites-only universities present an inherently stressful environment for Black students, as they grapple with racism-inflicted experiences that impede their psychological and academic coping abilities. The social stress theory supports the notion of anticipated psycho-social residual effects from apartheid, which can be characterised as continuous traumatic stress of apartheid (Jackson et al., 2010). Such residual effects suggest that institutions of higher education have failed to address the historical systemic issue of racism on campuses (Murugesu, 2020). Therefore, even though apartheid has been constitutionally abolished, the lens of social stress theory demonstrates contextual applicability within a South African university context and illuminates how Black students continue to endure the legacy of apartheid. This is evident in the persistent racism they experience post-apartheid within historically Whites-only higher education institutions.

This study uniquely highlights the importance of conceptualising continuous traumatic social stress in its embeddedness in individual, socio-political and institutional racial contextual factors. This is particularly true when considering the intricate racial dynamics stemming from historical aspects of the South African political landscape. In this context, the majority population, comprising Black people, has historically faced and continues to experience racial and socio-economic marginalisation. According to Anderson (2013), the social context in which an individual is embedded determines the types of stressors they are confronted with, as well as their access to coping resources. Black students find themselves enrolling in historically Whites-only universities, however, these institutions still uphold racially exclusive cultures. The positioning of the authors was to build on the existing body of work on this theoretical framework, with universal relative application to a South African historically Whites-only university. This is premised on the argument that transformative efforts at instituting systemic academic and psychological coping structures to foster integration have been unsuccessful. Undeniably, numerous studies highlight the urgent need for meaningful transformations within South African universities following the apartheid era. This underscores the fact that the higher education landscape in South Africa is still rooted in the country's history of marginalising (Bawa, 2012).

It is important to note that the social stress theory perspective takes into consideration the role of an individual's psychological resources, namely global self-esteem and mastery (Levy et al., 2016). This perspective purports that individuals with a strong sense of self or who have a sense of mastery over their external environment will report better psychological well-being (Levy et al., 2016). The authors argue that this, however, places the burden of coping adaptively on victims of racism which disregards the traumatisation and thus psychological cost of racism on Black students. A criticism of social stress theory is that an

occurrence of systemic stressors may not necessarily imply a dysfunctional social system but is rather an indication that the system is not functioning as it should (Levy et al., 2016). In the context of this study, this refers to institutional racism in post-apartheid higher educational systems that have failed in transformative actions to create an equitable and inclusive environment for all students. Therefore, highlighting the difference between perceiving stressful events as unplanned circumstances and seeing them as modelled by social structures is an important distinction to make (Levy et al., 2016). This was evidenced by the reported shared experiential reality of racism by participants in the present study, which suggests that racism is embedded within the institution and therefore does not occur by accident. Whether Black students in this study chose to cope with racism through resistance or conscious avoidance, it is important to note that stressors emanating from internal or external demands disrupt their physical and psychological well-being (Martin et al., 2011).

This indicates that the legacy of an oppressive system, such as apartheid, cannot be undone overnight (Cooper, 2008), and that it has enduring deleterious effects on the psychological health of Black people in comparison to their White counterparts (Jackson et al., 2010). As the Black post-apartheid generation continues to advocate for racial equality and inclusion at historically Whites-only universities, questions arise as to how successful South Africa is in its transformation policies at institutions of higher learning (Mzangwa & Dede, 2019). Institutions of higher education contribute to the broader community and must be responsive to social and psychological needs (Gray & Bernstein, 2021). Therefore, universities are morally indebted to lead, inquire, and dispute social issues, and through research uncover probable solutions to social dilemmas (Gray & Bernstein, 2021). South African universities should be accountable in working towards dismantling continuous repercussions of apartheid and in attaining a fair and just society (Gray & Bernstein, 2021), in line with the community psychology approach. This study employed social stress theory as a contextually transferable theoretical framework in exploring how social conditions, particularly structurally entrenched racism at an historically Whites-only university in South Africa overstretches Black students' coping resources. As a result, their ability to cope with these challenges becomes strained, thus compromising their cognitive and emotional well-being.

3. Coping with racism

Therefore, considering enduring racialised experiences of post-1994 Black students attending an historically White-only university, the study explored how these students cope with racism. Coping as defined by Snyder (1999) refers to actions people take to alleviate physical, emotional, and psychological distress caused by stressful life circumstances or daily crises. Moreover, coping is a conscious psychological process which requires mobilisation of an individual's internal resources. As expanded upon by Deasy et al. (2014), coping refers to cognitive and emotional strategies employed to address challenges and pressures arising from both internal and external factors. Its objective is to alleviate, diminish, or endure stress whilst defending against psychological distress. According to Cramer (1998) coping differs from defence mechanisms in that defence mechanisms are unconscious, unintentional, and automatic psychological processes. There are multifactorial influences on coping, including psychological flexibility, resilience, and internalised attitudes. These factors play a crucial role

in effectively managing stress and fostering psychological and social well-being (Dawson & Moghaddam, 2020; Krok & Zarzycka, 2020).

4. Community Psychology approach to racism

The community psychology approach offers valuable insights and strategies for addressing racism within society. There is an emphasis on the importance of understanding racism as a systemic issue deeply rooted in historical and social contexts (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). By adopting this approach, practitioners acknowledge that racism extends beyond individual attitudes and behaviours, and instead focus on how structures and institutions perpetuate inequality and discrimination (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This perspective not only aligns with principles of empowerment and social justice, aiming to foster inclusive and equitable communities (Duffy, 2013), but the objectives of this study too. By actively collaborating with communities affected by racism, community psychologists promote participatory processes to challenge and transform oppressive systems (Bond et al., 2020). Through emphasis on collective action, advocacy and community empowerment, a community psychology approach provides a comprehensive framework for addressing racism and striving towards a more equitable and just society. These kinds of interventions mirror the needs of a born-free generation of Black students in a South African historically White-only university where the current study was conducted.

5. Method

A qualitative research approach was followed to address the aim and the research questions guiding this study. The adoption of a qualitative approach was deemed apt as it facilitated the process of discerning explanations and meanings of how the post-apartheid generation of Black students cope with racism at an historically Whites-only university (Creswell, 2016). The transcendental phenomenological (TPh) design underpinned the research design, as the study sought to understand the lived experiences of how post-apartheid Black students cope with racism. TPh is based on the idea of setting aside preconceived ideas, thus understanding a phenomenon through an unfiltered lens, something Moustakas referred to as epoch (Sousa, 2014). Therefore, in sharing their experiences of racism, participants recounted raw and unclouded perceptions of their encounters. Furthermore, what appeared to be overt acts of racism and institutional racism were extensively explored during the interview process, as each participant gave examples of their experiences. This according to Moustakas (1994, p. 69) explains the "what of experience" as the "object-correlate."

5.1. Procedure for recruiting participants

The study utilised purposive (non-probability) sampling. This technique refers to selecting participants because of characteristics they hold or experiences they have had (Etikan et al., 2016). The study required participants who had experienced institutional racism and/or overt acts of racism at an historically Whites-only university. To achieve this a flyer was posted on

the noticeboards at the university campus. For purposes of this study, on the flyer racism was broadly defined as ranging from derogatory or discriminatory remarks to exclusionary practices. Whilst institutional racism was defined as a type of racism that is portrayed as acceptable within the university's policies, structure, and practice. It results in biased disciplinary practices, limited access to educational resources, and alienation within the academic environment. To facilitate a better response and a broader reach of students who are studying at the institution, the flyer was also distributed on the researcher's personal social media page tagging the university page. The objective was to adhere to the guidelines of phenomenological research design by recruiting a maximum of six participants.

Once the first six students who were interested in participating in the study had contacted the researcher the post was removed. A total of six post-apartheid generation of Black students studying towards various degrees participated in the study. The small sample size is in alignment with the objective of qualitative studies which is to understand the meaning of phenomena, not to quantify them which is a defining characteristic of quantitative research (Rahman, 2016). The inability to quantify and generalise is acknowledged as a noteworthy limitation of qualitative studies (Roald et al., 2021). However, based on the phenomenological approach, the researcher studied the phenomenon by attempting to understand the data from the participants' perspectives (Neubauer et al., 2019), which was explored in-depth to generate rich data.

5.2.   Selection criteria

The three inclusion criteria were firstly, Black African students (male and female) who are citizens of South Africa studying at a particular historically Whites-only university. Secondly, they had to be between the ages of 18 and 27 years at the time the study was conducted, in fitting with the aim of the study, as the sample of participants had to be born post the apartheid era. Lastly, the participants must have experienced institutional racism and/or overt acts of racism (intentional and conscious hatred or discrimination because of their race) at the university campus. The study was not inclusive of students born before the year 1994; or students who identified as Coloured, Mixed-race, Indian, or White. The final sample consisted of six Black South African students who consented to participating in the study. These participants were born post-apartheid; three were male, and three were female. It should be noted that for all participants, English was the preferred language of communication, and that each participant chose their preferred pseudonym to protect their identity. Five of the six participants were postgraduate students, with one being an undergraduate student. The following is a summary of the participants' biographical details at the time of data generation. Participant 1: TK is a 25-year-old South African male who is currently studying for his bachelor's degree in education. He began his university journey in 2015, during which he was involved in the #AfrikaansMustFall protest. Participant 2: Nombuso, a 27 year old female student, is currently pursuing her master's degree at the University. Participant 3: Lindani, a 26-year-old male student, is currently enrolled in the university's master's program in psychology. Participant 4: Sisi, a 26 year old female, is also a postgraduate student completing a master's degree in psychology. Participant 5: Mpho, the youngest participant, is a 22 year old male student pursuing an honours degree in anthropology. Participant 6: Noxolo, a 27-year-old female, is studying towards a postgraduate degree in architecture.

5.3. Data collection

The method of data generation was guided by the phenomenological approach and utilised in-depth semi-structured interviews, as these interviews are often richer in terms of nuances and depth (Englander, 2012). Interview questions were used as a guide, whilst probing questions allowed for an in-depth understanding of how individual participants cope with racism (Jamshed, 2014). Semi-structured interviews are suitable for a transcendental phenomenological design because they allow participants the flexibility of emphasising what they feel is important. The primary researcher skilfully employed gentle probing techniques to extract in-depth and precise information from the participants, thereby enhancing the richness and clarity of the data (Jamshed, 2014). This approach was particularly effective considering the small sample size.

The interview guide consisted of a total of nine questions, which were subdivided into four discussion-guiding sections. The first section involved gathering biographical information. Section 2 consisted of questions that explored participants' understanding of racism and apartheid. An example of a question in section 2 was: "What is your understanding of racism?" Section 3 focused on participants' experiences of racism at the university. The purpose of these questions was to elicit students' personal experiences of overt acts of racism and institutional racism. "How have the experiences of racism within a university context affected you as a young Black person living in post-apartheid South Africa (socially, emotionally, and psychologically)?" is an example of one of the questions asked in section 3. The last section explored how participants coped with racism. An example of these questions was "Considering your experiences of racism within a university context, how have you coped/do you cope with such experiences?"

5.4. Ethical considerations

Throughout the study ethical adherence was a sustained process from the development of the research proposal to completion of the final report (Noble & Smith, 2015). Before commencing with the research project, the researcher obtained proposal approval from the Department of Psychology Research Committee and ethics approval from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (HUM041/1020).

Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, and full informed consent was sought, including their consent for the recording of interviews. Additionally, they were explicitly made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, ensuring their autonomy and freedom to discontinue their involvement (Mohd Arifin, 2018). To ensure transparency, participants were informed about the sensitive nature of the study topic and were explicitly informed about the requirements and expectations associated with their participation. Confidentiality was upheld by replacing identities with pseudonyms during the report writing and data analysis phases (Babbie, 2010). The principles of beneficence and non-maleficence encompass an obligation to balance benefits to the participants against the risks, and they require that the researcher prevent any possible harm (Townsend et al., 2010). With this ethical consideration in mind, participants were not overburdened with questions; thus, none of the participants were left emotionally distressed. As a preventive measure, to ensure that no harm occurred, the primary researcher was alert to participants' potential emotional discomfort. Also, to ensure adequate psychological support permission had been obtained

from a registered clinical psychologist in private practice who was on standby and available immediately should participants have needed counselling or debriefing, at no cost to the participants.

5.5. Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to analyse data from semi-structured interviews, which explored how participants coped with racism, focusing on both semantic and latent features of the data. This type of analysis was suitable for an interview-based approach, as the study aimed to qualitatively explore spoken experiences and enhance the researcher's understanding of shared experiential themes.

Using an inductive approach to thematic analysis, codes and themes were developed from the data content. In practice this involved the first step of analysis as recommended by Terre Blanche et al. (2014) consisted of familiarisation and immersion, which were achieved by the researcher's familiarisation with the data, listening to and transcribing audio recordings. Subsequent to the data being transcribed, the researcher repeatedly engaged with the transcripts, then moving to recursive coding of the data during which codes were returned to and revised. The coding process was led by the primary researcher, herein information from participants' responses was highlighted, colour-coded, and grouped. Thereby, recurrent and similar phrases and responses were noted. Codes were then clustered together into potential themes, to give some indication of their prevalence, test their value in giving an overall account of the data and assess whether patterns described were evident across most or all the dataset (Terre Blanche et., 2014).

The process of analysis shifted through data familiarisation and extensive coding into theme development and review. Step three involved the generation of themes. Theme construction was iterative and consultative, with the first and second authors consulting regularly throughout this process to discuss the findings, and to validate the interpretations developed. With analysis subsequently shifting focus to the broader level of themes, different codes were used to label potential themes, with relevant data extracts ('quotes') gathered within the identified themes. It was possible for the same section of text to be included in multiple categories. Each theme cohered around a central organising concept. The data were systematically reviewed to ensure that a name, definition, and an exhaustive set of data to support each category were identified. Over time, main themes and subthemes gradually developed and these were then validated by the supervising author to ensure rigour of analysis. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts generated one overarching theme, 5 main themes and 11 subthemes viewed as essential to understand racialised experiences of all participants. The final step involved collation and interpretation of themes with relevance to the study and linking the themes to social stress theory and reviewed literature through the discussion of findings.

5.6. Ensuring trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of results is the foundation of rigorous qualitative research and can be augmented by integrating certain quality control measures (Polkinghorne, 2007). The four components of trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were adhered to in ensuring quality of the study. These components comprise credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was ascertained through iterative engagement

with the data during the analysis stage, wherein the researchers repeatedly assessed the relevance of the conclusions with the original meaning construed from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The second component, dependability, refers to the temporal and contextual reliability of the conditions supporting the data and study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was ensured through the primary researcher's maintenance of process log entries noting all decisions and activities occurring throughout the study (Connelly, 2016). To ensure confirmability the researchers also maintained an audit trail of the analysis of data to demonstrate how conclusions had been reached (Connelly, 2016). The fourth component is transferability, which was ensured by the researchers' provision of a clear contextual description of the study to assist readers in determining the degree of applicability the findings may have to other situations (Connelly, 2016).

The researcher's social identity may have resulted in a biased interpretation of the findings, as well as data collection, as participants might have been biased and shared information that they thought the researcher might have wanted to hear. Given the researcher's personal experiences as a student at the historically Whites-only university and background as a Black 'born-free' female, there could have been probing and interpretation on certain aspects of the participants' narratives whilst others may have been neglected. However, efforts were made to uphold the trustworthiness of the study as far as possible. The researcher's reflexivity was also considered in this section on trustworthiness, as Moser and Korstjens (2018) suggest that reflexivity is an important aspect of safeguarding quality in qualitative research. Through the process of the interviews and the data analysis, the primary researcher represented the experiences of the participants truthfully, and was careful not to let her own perceptions influence how she represented their experiences (Fassinger, 2005). Additionally, to minimise the participants' (especially female participants') assumed commonalities with the researcher (Holt, 2011), it was important to keep the focus of the study on the participant and to maintain a professional space. It was essential for the researcher to identify her personal opinions about experiences of racism during the process of data analysis and reporting, to ensure reflexivity.

5.7.   Reflexivity

As the primary researcher, being a 26-year-old Black female student who had relocated from a small town to a predominantly White Afrikaans-speaking province of Gauteng and studying at a historically Whites-only university, the participants' experiences resonated with me. Having had similar experiences to those of the participants enabled me to listen empathically to their subjective experiences. As I travelled together with them on the emotional roller coaster of articulated frustrations and fears, and the liberation of having a voice, I provided a safe and non-judgemental space, to ensure sufficient transparency. Therefore, my assumptions, together with the experiences articulated by the participants, may have influenced the way I interpreted the findings. I wanted the frustration, bitterness, and brokenness of my participants to be felt and to be evident in my interpretation and discussion of the findings. To emphasise the grievances which were left unattended, I was no longer an observer judging from a television screen, but rather a part of my participants' experiences.

During the analysis, I reminded myself of my role and sought to balance my personal interpretations with the actual content expressed by the participants. I was careful not to

impose my own biases onto their experiences but rather remained mindful and reflective of my own feelings evoked during each interview. I also reviewed literature on coping with racism, recognising that as a Black person, it is unlikely to live a life free from racism. However, I explored adaptive ways of coping without over-interpreting their experiences. I acknowledge that the findings of this study are a co-construction of my personal realities and those of the participants.

Therefore, it was essential that I allow participants to be experts of their own experiences. Building rapport with them was facilitated by my shared identity as a Black student and peer, which helped alleviate their fear of being victimised. Here it is important to note that during the process of the interviews, I refrained from discussing my personal experiences and thoughts on coping with racism. Lastly, during the interview process I was not naive to the fact that some shared experiences affected my view on racism. I became pro-Black, with an elevated sense of my Blackness. I became critical of how society has maintained systemic and institutional racism post-apartheid, as evidenced by a recent news broadcast on student protests against historical student debt. Nevertheless, the experiences shared by some participants have enlightened me to the fact that incidents of racism do not have to define my experiential reality or undermine my sense of self. It is important to recognise that racism persists in our society and I want to make a psychological contribution to the social justice agenda.

6. Discussion of findings

Five main themes and one overarching theme were generated relating to how the post-apartheid generation of Black students coped with racism at an historically Whites-only institution of higher education. It is significant to note that due to a limited sample size, the findings of the study speak to micro-ecologies of racism and how these are informed by structural inequalities and may not necessary represent the entire post-apartheid generation of Black students. The findings demonstrated that academic determination, boldness, escaping, faith, and support are means by which Black students coped with racism. The common underlying theme of being included spoke to the students' need to be psychologically, socially and academically integrated into an historically Whites-only university environment. The sub-themes included working hard, focusing on the finish line, challenging the system, fighting in defiance, refusal to conform, self-preservation, prayer, hopefulness, support groups, interpersonal support from fellow Black people, and being accommodated. The discussion seeks to address findings as directed by the overarching research aim and objectives grounded in the contextual applicability of the social stress theoretical framework to an historically White-only university.

Academic determination

As aforementioned, a significant marker of tertiary education during the apartheid era was that higher education was reserved for White people (Spaull, 2013). Black students had to fight their way through an oppressive education system and disrupt unsolicited perceptions of being considered as having inferior cognitive abilities (Dalal, 2013). However, now in a post-apartheid South Africa, a study by Andrews (2019) demonstrates how Black students must still contend with being alienated in lecture halls, as they persevere to excel academically. As TK discouragingly reflected, "You find yourself running to a class and when you arrive you will

find it full to capacity. Now you have to sit on the stairs….and take notes." Here, TK gives an account of running to attend lectures taught in English, where most of the Black students attended because they could never attend lectures taught in Afrikaans, due to the language barrier. Regardless of sitting in cramped lecture halls, TK as a Black student was resolute to grasp any opportunity for a chance at a competitive edge in his academic determination. This is suggestive of systemic stressors perpetuating underlying dynamics of academic exclusion which Black students endure at an historically White-only university.

Participants articulated frustration at having the integrity of their intellect and inner sense of self undermined, in their quest to acquire knowledge at an historically Whites-only university. The frustration with the unequal treatment in lecture halls is fuelled by the existing gap between Black students and White students in terms of affordability and privilege when it comes to university fees. This division between Black and White students poses a challenging situation where feelings of shame lead Black students to perceive themselves as being looked down upon and less favoured compared to their White counterparts. Sisi observed that it is unlikely that a White student will be found in National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) queue at the beginning of the year seeking financial assistance. This is one example of historical privilege White students inherited which perpetuates the racial and socio-economic divide. Regardless, TK shared his determination despite economic challenges which have prolonged his undergraduate studies: "And the only thing that comes to your mind is Eish! Now I will be sent back to that poverty. So I will never rest because now, you see yourself at the finish line." Such racial and economic hardships are underlying reverberations in the formation of the #FeesMustFall movement in 2015, through which students demanded free tuition and decolonisation of the curriculum (Albertus & Tong, 2019). Evidently, the #FeesMustFall movement and continued yearly protests against academic exclusion due to financial constraints, highlight economic exclusion and inequality in the higher education system in contemporary South Africa, which is a form of institutional racism (Bosch, 2016) participants in this study still bear witness to.

Noxolo demonstrated how as a Black student, she has refused to conform to the perception that Black people have inferior minds. She articulated, "They [White lecturers] think we always want to ask for help, we always want to ask for hand-outs, so I make sure that I do everything that I can, by making sure that I do great in school." This participant demonstrates what Levy et al. (2016) suggested as premised in the social stress theory, that individuals with a strong sense of self or who have a sense of mastering their external environment will report better psychological well-being. Therefore, the current study reveals that academic determination as a coping strategy is defiantly reinforced by the ongoing undermining, victimisation, and exclusion experienced by these Black students. This coping strategy is also supported by Holder et al. (2015), in concluding that focusing on meaningful work and shifting attention to working hard is how some Black students cope emotionally with racial stress.

However, some of the findings by Nadal et al. (2014) challenge the theme of academic determination, as they found that racism had a significant impact on Black students' academic performance. This denotes that continuous exposure to racism contributes to low self-esteem, resulting in Black students being demotivated in furthering their studies. This was demonstrated by Noxolo: "So I felt like I can't be here trying to prove a point that Black people can make it in life. So if I want to proceed in life, I would rather go to another university." Nombuso also shared similar sentiments about dropping out, "And if my results

come back for this year as a fail, I am just going to walk away. I have wasted money and time." Joorst (2019) concurs with Nadal et al. (2014) in that racial discrimination within the university context is associated with poor academic performance. Even though some research findings challenge the coping mechanisms of academic determination, some of the Black generation of students in this study demonstrated how they were utilising academic success in hopes to resolutely challenge the status quo of a racially and academically alienating historically Whites-only university. Therefore, for some in this participant group of Black students, academic determination demonstrates an adaptive means of coping, contrary to findings by Priest et al. (2011) and Brondolo et al. (2009), in their focus only on unhealthy coping strategies likely due to psychological distress caused by racism.

Boldness

Heffernan and Nieftagodien (2016) gave an account of how the Black students of 1976 stood up against the oppression of an unfair and victimising education system. They waged war against unequal access to education and against being taught in Afrikaans, and against unequal access to opportunities (Heffernan and Nieftagodien, 2016). Now, post-apartheid, TK poignantly recounts his experience at the university of what he described as a physical war between Black and White students as well as police officials. TK recalled:

> *"So, we had to be bold. That was one of my other experiences, and there are other events obviously that emanated from the protest… that #AfrikaansMustFall, where there was a lot of confrontation. I remember one of the biggest events was by the chemistry building. It was actually a fight. People who were there would remember it was actually a fight."*

Therefore, the findings of the present study also illustrate that challenging discriminatory university systems was another way of coping in the face of institutional racism. The boldness shown by Black students during the #AfrikaansMustFall protest in 2015, bears evidence of perpetuating economic, academic, and psychological struggles of overt institutional racism from an apartheid-era.

While three of the participants shared their experiences of challenging systemic marginalisation and exclusion in lecturer halls and residences in attempt to cope, Nombuso articulated how she coped with belittling and victimisation of being graded unfairly. She decided to be bold in her failed attempt to get her script re-marked. She defended her intelligence and competence with unwavering persistence in getting the attention of her White lecturer and demanding a re-mark. However, this study uncovered that Nombuso's as well as three other Black students' internal coping resources and proactive coping solutions became depleted when they chose to challenge the system against overt institutional racism. This is a result of the feared reality of victimisation, through either receiving below-average marks or not being guided towards academic support opportunities resulting in academic exclusion. The study uncovered that male students exhibited a more expressive approach in challenging systemic injustices by engaging in collective action. On the other hand, female students tended to internalise their experiences of discrimination, with the exception of one female student who expressed her concerns regarding grades, though to no avail. The present study thus supports findings by Thomas and Hollenshead (2001), in that one of the mechanisms some Black students use to cope with racism or to survive institutional racism is

by constantly collectively challenging it. In the context of this historically Whites-only university, this is observed in boycotting the social milieu and through sporadic protests.

Even though boldness is demonstrated by defiantly waging war against racism or challenging an oppressive system, it makes one wonder if the struggle against racism will ever cease, or for how long will Black students continue to endure discrimination, and to what psychological cost will they continue to fight against it. This is as participants in the current study continue to be inspired by the youth of 1976 and identify with historical heroes of the apartheid era. In this regard, Lindani said, "There were moments when I felt like I needed to defend myself, like I felt like I needed to be a Steve Biko in order to protect Black people." In accord with previous findings, post-apartheid Black students in this study still advocate for social justice in the form of academically inclusive institutions of higher education and learning (Puttick, 2011). Despite the assertiveness of coping with racism boldly, other participants indicated the compulsion to escape racism physically and emotionally

Physically and emotionally escaping

While some participants in this study coped with racism by boldly challenging the system, some chose to cope by avoiding overt acts of racism and institutional racism in the form of biased disciplinary practices, limited access to educational resources, and marginalisation by academic staff and peers within the academic environment. The coping mechanism of physically and emotionally escaping spoke to how some participants in the study coped by means of both accepting the intuitive truth of the existence of racism at an historically Whites-only university and choosing not to challenge it, and rather containing their hurt, frustration, and grievances by means of self-preservation. This is explained as a feeling of not belonging among their White counterparts, which is overtly seen in never being invited to be part of any social or academic group and having their contributions dismissed during lectures. As aforementioned, social stress theory proposes that stressful life experiences and the environment contribute to an individual's potential inability to cope adaptively (Mossakowski, 2014).

As participants in the study gave an account of their backgrounds, with some having grown up in rural communities, they mentioned that they had always been mindful of a society dominated by 'Whiteness'. Noxolo expressed that, growing up it was instilled in them that, "White people dominated in higher positions." They were deemed better in society, thus placing Black people in a disadvantaged social position. Therefore, according to social stress theory, chronic exposure to racism can be stressful for Black students and being exposed to a university environment that perpetuates racism affects the way Black students cope. For example, some participants described a *"res culture"* that is maintained at the university, from the naming of student residences to dancing and singing along to Afrikaans songs, a practice considered a tradition for first-year students. Others mentioned their humiliation when their competence as Black students was challenged by White lecturers in lecture halls, as preference was given to White students. Regarding coping with academic grievances, Noxolo and Nombuso expressed a shared sentiment of contemplating leaving the university due to their repeated below-average marks, despite putting forth their best efforts

Both participants would choose to walk away from a battle described as *"pointless"*. This finding supports the argument by Joorst (2019) that racial discrimination within institutions of higher education was related to increased dropout rates. TK who has repeated a few modules reflected on how some Black students have had to drop out because of "their

emotional state at that particular time". Given the varied findings of this major theme, it indicates that some participants in the current study chose to ignore racism as a way of strategically coping with their experiences of racism and refusing to lose their identity by conforming to a racist culture. Therefore, contrary to the findings by Priest et al. (2011) and Brondolo et al. (2009) in seeing avoidance as an unhealthy coping strategy, and the likelihood of psychological distress caused by racism; it signifies self-preservation against a larger punitive system to prevent feelings of an alienated inner sense of self.

Additionally, participants in the present study coped by either *"looking away"* or being *"passive-aggressive"*, acknowledging that "you should never attempt to resolve issues" because you put yourself at risk of victimisation and being perceived as politically agitative. It is for these reasons that Sisi kept whatever she may have been hurting from to herself. This confirms Frazier's (2016) reasoning that silence is a significant coping mechanism in resisting racism. As purported by the social stress theory enduring effects of apartheid can be regarded as the continuous traumatic stress of apartheid (Jackson et al., 2010). Thus, the silence of Black students is rooted in a survival mechanism as observed in some Back people during apartheid. The way participants maintain their silence regardless of the emotional effects of racism is a psychological adaptation of survival and continuing with an education that they worked hard to access. Strategically, silence is their ticket to successfully completing their degree, for fear of being disadvantaged when it comes to academic appraisals, as well as an act of defiance. However, their silence is a manifestation of marginalisation as it also takes away from enriched learning experiences during lectures. Unfortunately, just as apartheid had tamed the voices of Black people (Frazier, 2016) internal cries, however, cannot be silenced as Nombuso uttered that due to the effects of racism "you could end up committing suicide" and that *"there is a very high rate of suicide in the University, which is never spoken about"*.

Mpho stated, "I am immune to it", while Lindani echoed, "…focus on my studies rather than to focus on the negative aspects of racism because it's everywhere". These participants confirm the *"pointless [ness]"* of *"calling out"* racism, thus illustrating how racism relentlessly continues to rear its ugly head, as suggested by Cooper (2008), infringing on their internal and external sense of self. These findings support the coping method of escaping suggested by Lewis et al. (2013), which revealed that other means of coping with racism were escaping and ignoring it. However, their findings were based only on Black female students. Nonetheless, the current study found that Lindani TK, and Mpho as Black male students also coped through a psychological defensive escape from racism. Other studies which are supported by the findings of the present study suggest that other means of coping with racially stressful events include internalising or detaching oneself from the event, emotional distancing in lecture settings, and intellectual disengagement from contributing during lectures (Martin et al., 2011; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). All participants shared an experience of being made to feel that they had no valuable contribution to make or that their contributions were misunderstood by their White lecturers and counterparts, as they are misunderstood.

The present study found that some Black students physically challenge the system, whereas Byrd (2007) found that Black students, as some participants in the current study, disregard continued structural inequalities and racial encounters out of fear of jeopardising their education. However, it is important to note that none of the participants in the present study reported having conformed to the university culture. Rather, they emphasised *"avoiding White spaces"*, as Mpho remarked that spaces dominated by White people are a "no-go area". Additionally, Nombuso explained that *"you basically have to walk away."* These

coping defences must be respected and understood as an attempt to uphold an integrated inner sense of self. Regardless of coping by mentally or physically escaping racism in lecture halls, residences and on campus, some participants still demonstrated a sense of faith and hopefulness.

Faith

Nombuso shared her experiences of racial discrimination, which went beyond just lecture halls and extended to eating areas and student service points. These encounters prepared her for future instances of racism, leading her to find solace in prayer as a way to cope with and surrender her experiences. Although prayer cannot physically eradicate racism, it has been found to have personal benefits. As stated by McCulloch and Park-Stamm (2018) the benefits of prayer consist of but are not limited to less stress and anxiety, increased positive mood, and enhanced self-esteem. This further supports studies by Giwa (2016) and Hernández et al. (2010), which discovered that to cope with race-based trauma, Black people turned to religious acts, such as prayer for comfort. This means of coping can perhaps be understood as a hopeful attempt to restore a sense of dignity, which experiences of racism seem to strip Black students of at this historically White-only university.

The sub-theme of hopefulness showed that regardless of distressing experiences of racism, Black students remain hopeful that their intellectual abilities will get them through their studies at an historically Whites-only university. Sisi spoke about having to remind herself of the reasons she is pursuing an education. Despite the reported experiences of racism, it is important that a distinction is drawn between coping by avoidance and maintaining the hope of surviving at an historically Whites-only institution of higher education. Therefore, these findings reinforce what was communicated under the major theme of academic determination, as well as the findings by Kessi and Cornell (2015) that enduring racial discrimination has to do with the opportunities Black students yearn for. Thus, the faith and hopefulness that some participants hold on to, are associated with obtaining an education and thereby breaking the unjust legacy of poverty. In pursuing further education in an historically Whites-only university, all participants also shared their need for support in coping with racism.

Support

Lewis and co-authors (2013) found that there is validation in sharing experiences of racial discrimination with other Black people who have similar shared struggles of racialisation. However, all participants experienced a lack of support from the institution, and they expressed their fear of negative reactions if they were to ask for help. This can be understood from a social stress theory perspective, in that being in an environment that perpetuates racism, Black students may struggle with sourcing means of support and thus capacitating their internal and external coping resources. For example, Sisi said, "I think a support group will be […] helpful." This may indicate that there are no existing support structures, even in the form of 'support groups' at the university. In their study, Liang et al. (2007) discovered that Black women depended on each other for assurance and comfort. However, one male participant in this study reflected, "So, liaising with other [Black] people kind of helped me." His need for support suggests that some male students might also benefit from collective support initiatives.

Findings from the current study also support the findings of Holder et al. (2015) and those of Lewis et al. (2013), in that participants found it liberating to engage in support groups with other Black people who shared similar experiences. In addition to South African findings, American studies are also consistent with the findings of the current study. As mentioned earlier Jean-Marie et al. (2014) found that African American women within a university context looked for support from fellow African Americans. Along with the need for support from the institution and peers, participants in this study also desired an inclusionary learning environment, wherein their psychological scarring from perpetuated racism can be acknowledged.

Inclusion

Inclusion was the underlying golden thread theme in coping with racism, though not necessarily communicated as a coping mechanism by participants in the study. However, given the number of times participants referred to "*being accommodated*," it underscores the acute need for academically and racially inclusive lecture halls, an integrative atmosphere, and consequently an integrative institution. This is echoed in Andrew's (2019) finding that campus events and institutional traditions that uphold White culture perpetuate Black students' feelings of alienation. Levy et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of noting the difference between unplanned stressful events and those modelled by social structures. Participants in the present study shared similar sentiments, as they voiced their grievances about an *"Afrikaans culture"* that is upheld at the university. In this regard, Sisi said, "It kind of troubled me, and psychologically it kind of felt like I am living in this apartheid state." Nombuso added, "I think even without the boards that say 'Blacks only' or 'Whites only', you definitely feel like you know your place." *Overt and covert* divisions along racial lines pre-dating apartheid persist at this university, as evidenced by the failure to include Black cultural celebrations or elements into its activities or programmes.

These Black students' experiences confirm the enduring racial exclusion perpetuated at historically Whites-only university post-apartheid, illuminating that racism as a stressful event is modelled by the university (Levy et al., 2016), thus exposing the structures, processes, and practices that assiduously uphold racism (Zamudio et al. 2011). Despite attempts made towards transformation in institutions of higher education (Mzangwa & Dede, 2019), the minimal changes made seem to mock the actual intentions of transformation. For example, TK noted that "the changes now made to the names of student residences do not necessarily change the Afrikaans culture that is maintained", in that the institution continues with racially exclusive traditions. This suggests that if universities were to meaningfully integrate Black students, they may be more inclined to adopt psychologically assimilative adaptive coping mechanisms.

Given the findings of the current study and past studies within the South African context, it appears that the implementation of transformation policies has been poorly monitored. Thus, a deep sense of not belonging is what the '*need to be accommodated*' points to. Failed attempts to create a so-called diverse and inclusive university culture, leave this sample of post-apartheid Black students longing to be meaningfully included, to foster a sense of belonging and not merely being enrolled at an historically White-only university for the sake of meeting the quotas of constitutional transformation policy directives.

7. Conclusion

This research underscores the enduring apartheid division along racial lines in South African universities, shedding light on the historical roots of racial disparities in higher education. The objective of this study was not to re-invent the wheel of the social-stress theoretical framework. This research, however, provides evidence of perpetuated overt acts of racism and institutional racism within post-apartheid educational institutions, transferable to Black students across historically White-only universities. The research question guiding the present study was to explore how the post-apartheid generation of Black students copes with racism at an historically Whites-only university.

Findings of experiences shared by a participant group of post-apartheid generation of Black students uncovered that even though the university continues to admit Black students and appears to have diversified its student population, it has not meaningfully integrated diversity structurally, to avert repressed traumatic stress responses to perpetuated overt and covert racial discrimination. Additionally, and undoubtedly transferable to other historically White-only universities, it was evident that Black students would cope better in an institution that critically engaged their academic, social, and emotional plight perpetuated by systemic racial undertones, for a racially and culturally inclusive institution of higher learning post-apartheid. By shedding light on these challenges, the study contributes to the academic discourse, particularly in community psychology and highlights the urgent need for transformative action led by students to create an inclusive and equitable educational environment for all. These findings echo the pressing need for implementing comprehensive policies and interventions to dismantle overt acts of racism and challenge deeply embedded institutional racism. This is because racial encounters experienced by participants stem from exclusion and their desire to be heard. By recognising and validating the experiences of these students, this study acknowledges their struggles and validates their emotions. This validation can foster a sense of empowerment among Black students, leading to increased self-awareness and agency in navigating racism at historically White-only higher education institutions.

Lastly, the present study contributes to research on internalising and externalising strategies of coping with racism at institutions of higher education. By identifying and analysing these coping mechanisms, this study provides valuable insights into how racial discrimination affects the mental well-being of marginalised students. Understanding such coping strategies is crucial for designing responsively effective support systems and interventions that can help mitigate the negative effects of racism on Black students' psychological health.

8. Limitations of the study

Some limitations to the current study are acknowledged. Although focusing on the post-apartheid generation of Black students served the purpose of the study, Black students born before 1994 were excluded. It may be argued that all Black students, regardless of their year of birth, share similar experiences because of the previously legislated apartheid-era's historical embeddedness of racism in South Africa. Also, even though Coloured and Indian students are categorised as Black, they were not considered as a sample for this study.

Regardless of the limitations outlined, this research study augments and offers current knowledge on Black students' experiences of racism, specifically on how the post-1994 generation of Black students copes. Furthermore, the present study may be valuable within the broader South African context of higher education, given that a vast body of literature examines the impact of racism on African Americans. The study was able to give Black students a voice, thereby challenging the notion that historically Whites-only universities are institutions that embrace diversity.

It is our hope that the findings and discussion presented in this study on Black students' experiences of racism will promote anti-discriminatory behaviour, as well as form a part of the continued curriculum transformation agenda at historically Whites-only universities, with a deeper understanding of the stress response secondary to underlying divisive racial dynamics rooted in institutions.

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