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**Decolonisation efforts in higher education and the lived experiences of social science
academics: A systematic review**

by

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Declaration

I, Marolet Botha, hereby declare that this dissertation, titled *Decolonisation efforts in higher education and the lived experiences of social science academics: A systematic review*, is my own original work, except where otherwise indicated. All sources that have been consulted, referenced, or quoted have been properly acknowledged and cited in accordance with the required academic standards.

I affirm that this work has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for any degree or examination at any other institution.

Ms Marolet Botha

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Signature

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Date

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Abstract

This study explores the subjective psychological experiences of academics engaged in decolonisation efforts within South African higher education. Decolonisation, aimed at dismantling Eurocentric paradigms and centring African knowledge, faces significant challenges, including institutional resistance, ambiguity, and exclusion. Academics play a central role in this process, yet many, particularly black academics, report feelings of marginalisation, undervaluation, and psychological strain. Efforts to decolonise curricula often strain relationships with students and peers, while systemic barriers such as job insecurity, heavy workloads, and resource limitations disproportionately affect young, black, and women academics. Despite progress in demographic diversity, racial imbalances and biases persist, perpetuating inequalities and hindering transformation. This study highlights the critical need for inclusive approaches and policies that reflect the lived experiences of academics to support their roles as agents of change. By synthesising 33 journal articles and book chapters on the lived experience of social science academics in South Africa between 2016-2024, the findings provide insights into the barriers, opportunities, and broader implications of decolonisation, emphasising the need for institutional accountability and transdisciplinary collaboration to achieve meaningful change in South Africa's higher education.

Keywords: Decolonisation, higher education, academics' perspectives, social sciences, qualitative systematic literature review

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

This chapter provides an introduction to the study by presenting background information, detailing the research problem and question, explaining the rationale and objectives, defining essential concepts, and outlining the structure of the dissertation.

1.2 Background

South Africa aims to take on a prominent role in Africa and globally in areas such as international relations, economics, conflict resolution, security, politics, and peacebuilding. To achieve this goal, South African universities will need to forge graduates who have world knowledge and skills to navigate its complexities (Heleta, 2016). Modern-day universities claim global importance as a place to study human nature and from which their graduates can declare universal excellence (Mamdani, 2019). Years after the “fallist movements” (Phaswana, 2019, p.157), calls for the decolonisation of higher education continue (Adefila et al., 2022). Exhaustive close examination and criticism have been experienced by South African public universities as the demands for change have increased (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021). The tensions in higher education intersect through other domains in society and impact South Africa’s social, cultural, economic, and political landscape (Adefila et al., 2022).

Academics in higher education in South Africa generally understand the process of decolonising curricula as a response to dismantling colonising and Eurocentric roots and re-centring their curriculums to be more African-centric. However, increasing concerns arise about the ambiguity, confusion, and disruption caused by decolonisation, leaving some academics unsure about its implications for them and their teaching methods (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021). Hlatshwayo and Alexander (2021) suggest that further research is required to examine academics’ experiences with transformation and decolonisation. In South Africa, it is crucial to explore academics’ understanding of decolonisation, as their

perspectives significantly influence the strategy and implementation of decolonising higher education (Sibanda, 2021).

Tamimi et al. (2023) conducted interviews on decolonising higher education, revealing a consensus among academics on challenging knowledge norms, racism, and colonial legacies, emphasising inclusivity and reflexive pedagogies; however, Moosavi (2022) suggests limitations in decolonial efforts due to unintentional perpetuation of exclusion and Western centrism. Laakso and Adu (2023) focus on faculty experiences in Africa, urging more attention to practical academia, echoed by Mashiyi et al. (2020) and Morreira (2017) in advocating for inclusive processes to achieve decolonisation. Additionally, Chasi (2019) and Chivaura (2023) share personal experiences and reflections on discrimination and the importance of valuing individual experiences in academia. Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021) discuss efforts to decolonise the social work curriculum at the University of Johannesburg. The study illustrates how the exploration of critical reflection on previous work can offer useful insights for other academic settings.

Vandeyar (2020) argues that the academic is the Achilles' heel in the efforts to decolonise higher education in South Africa, as their attitudes, teaching practices, and beliefs form an important part of this process. Numerous studies have explored academics' lived experiences of the decolonisation of higher education (Chasi, 2019; Chivaura, 2023; Dreyer, 2017; Frizelle, 2016; Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021; Kiguwa, 2019; Mamdani, 2019; Mapuya, 2023; Nathane, 2019; Phaswana, 2019; Sibanda, 2021; Vandeyar, 2020). This systematic review seeks to offer a thorough synthesis and deeper insight into these perspectives. By identifying underlying patterns, themes, and potential inconsistencies, the review seeks to offer a thorough summary of evidence. Ultimately, this synthesised knowledge could inform policy and practice (Linnenluecke et al., 2020; McMahon et al., 2022; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020).

Due to the racial classifications of the apartheid regime, the South African higher education context remains a racialised space which has an enormous impact on teaching and learning, as well as the everyday experiences of students as well as academics

(Frizelle, 2019). Despite the increased number of university staff in recent years (Maphalala et al., 2022), and the positive change in racial demographics (Frizelle, 2019), demographic representation has not been realised (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). Universities continue to grapple with a glaring imbalance within their institutional hierarchies (Albertus, 2019).

Instruction and research staff at public higher education institutions in South Africa, as of 2021, are 38% white while only 7.8% of the total population of South Africa is white (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023) while black academics and researchers are only 45% of the staff, meanwhile, this population group makes 80.9% of the country's population (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023; Maphalala et al., 2022). What is worse, according to Albertus (2019), many black academics are made to think and feel as if they are not good enough because of regularly being overlooked, underestimated, and undermined. Furthermore, job opportunities are reserved for previously advantaged individuals and unrealistic expectations are often placed on historically disadvantaged academics.

As highlighted in many critical autoethnographic works and narratives (Chasi, 2019; Frizelle, 2019; Jawitz, 2019; Kiguwa, 2019; Nathane, 2019; Phaswana, 2019;) racial identity and all that it involves is very much present in academics' interpretations of their lived experience in teaching and learning spaces. Academia, according to Thielsch (2020), is not without bias, but created, lived, and reproduced by individuals, who themselves have been socialised within specific knowledge production modes, and embedded with ideals and standards, which are transmitted through academic practices.

1.3 Rationale

Current research on decolonising higher education in South Africa predominantly centers on students' lived experiences (Long, 2018; Maine & Wagner, 2021; Sadiki & Steyn, 2022; Silva, 2018; Urson & Kessi, 2018), the interpretations of decolonisation (Andreotti et al., 2015; Machingambi, 2020), the challenges of decolonisation (Ajani, 2024; Luckett & Bhatt, 2024; Rizvi, 2019; Shaik & Kahn, 2021; Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020; Vandeyar, 2020),

drivers framing decolonisation (Adefila et al., 2022; Hlatshwayo, 2023), attempts at creating a decolonised curriculum and pedagogy (Arday et al., 2020; Begum, 2019; Denny & Wepener, 2021; Engelbrecht et al., 2019; Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017; Gravett et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2021; Kessi & Boonzaaier, 2018; Lange, 2019; Le Grange, 2019; Lumadi, 2021), decolonisation and transformation in higher education (Bell et al., 2020; Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2021; Jansen, 2019; Mamdani, 2019; Woldegiorgis, 2021; Zwane, 2019), the various approaches to decolonisation (Castell et al., 2018; Chasi & Rodney-Gumede, 2020; Mbhele et al., 2024; Moosavi, 2022; Nakagawa, 2021), the decolonisation of knowledge (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Hoadly & Galant, 2019; Makhele, 2018; Olsson, 2023), creating safe spaces for students (Hartal, 2017; Klaasen, 2023; Postma, 2020), the purpose of education in South Africa (Hlatshwayo & Shawa; 2020), paradigms in the discourse on the decolonisation of Higher Education in Africa (Hungwe & Ndofirepi, 2022), the role of leadership in the decolonisation process (Grant et al., 2018; Jansen, 2017) epistemic justice (Heleta, 2016; Held, 2020; Kessi, 2017; Khoo et al., 2020; Motala et al., 2021; Reiter, 2019; Walker, 2018), and decolonisation in the context of globalisation and internationalisation (Nsizwazonke, 2020; Oppong, 2019; Reese et al., 2015; Shahjahan et al., 2021).

In South Africa, there is a demand for an investigation into the understanding that academics hold of the significance and interpretation of decolonisation as the strategy and implantation of the decolonisation of higher education depend greatly on them (Sibanda, 2021). It is important for universities to offer quality education that can make significant contributions to societal improvement and growth. This research aims to enrich the expanding body of literature on decolonisation in higher education by exploring how social science academics perceive the concept of decolonising their curricula and the challenges they face in the process. Frizelle (2019) emphasises the importance of designing curricula that reflect and resonate with the lived histories of African individuals (inclusive of all races), which first requires understanding the lived experiences of academics. This research aims to support academics in their efforts to decolonise teaching and learning spaces, equipping

them to navigate challenges more effectively (Costandius et al., 2018). Ultimately, this synthesised knowledge could inform policy and practice.

The current study aims to fill the space left open by the lack of a qualitative systematic review of academics' lived experiences of the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. The social sciences were chosen for the focus of this study as this academic field focuses on the study of human nature. The research is relevant to the field of psychology since it concentrates on the lived experiences of academics, which can refer to the subjective, personal perspectives and insights that individuals in academia acquire through their everyday interactions, challenges, and achievements within their professional environment. The real-world experiences of academics are significant to the field of psychology because they reveal complex psychological dynamics in work, identity, and social interactions, contributing to our understanding of human behaviour in professional settings. The decision was made to broaden the scope from psychology academics to include social science academics as the number of studies available on the lived experiences of psychology academics were limited.

1.3.1 Research Question

The study focuses on the experiences of academics and their perspectives on the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa by posing the question: What is the understanding and experience of social science academics regarding the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy in higher education in South Africa as represented in existing published literature? The research question of this study guided the formation of the following sub-questions of the review:

- How do social science academics define, interpret, and navigate decolonisation within their disciplines and institutions?
- How do identity, power dynamics, and institutional structures shape academics' experiences of and engagement with decolonial work?

- What challenges and barriers do social science academics, particularly early-career scholars, face in advancing decolonisation in higher education?

1.3.2 Aim and Objectives

This study explores the literature's perspective on the understanding and experiences of social science academics regarding the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy in higher education in South Africa. The objectives of this study are to examine how social science academics define, interpret, and navigate decolonisation within their disciplines and institutions; to analyse the influence of identity, power dynamics, and institutional structures on academics' engagement with decolonial work; and to identify the key challenges and barriers that social science academics, particularly early-career scholars, face in advancing decolonisation in higher education.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The interpretivist paradigm is guided by principles such as contextualisation, the hermeneutic circle, researcher-subject interaction, generalisation and abstraction, multiple interpretations, dialogical reasoning, and a critical viewpoint, all of which support a deeper understanding of human phenomena in qualitative research (Gichuru, 2017). Its main objective is to understand the subjective nature of human experiences (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) and how people construct, adapt, and interpret their social realities (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Using this approach helps researchers “get into the head” (p.33) of the humans whom they are studying (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The interpretive paradigm places greater emphasis on nuanced variables and contextual factors, viewing humans as distinct from physical phenomena. It suggests that human understanding delves deeper into meanings, operating under the assumption that exploring humans cannot follow the same methodologies used for examining physical phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). It asserts that knowledge and truth are subjective, shaped by historical and cultural contexts, and grounded in individual experiences and their personal interpretations of those experiences (Ryan, 2018).

Interpretive research holds the belief that reality is shared and socially constructed, and context is important when creating meaning and knowledge (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Interpretivism considers circumstantial and cultural differences when it comes to the creation of various social realities (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Gichuru, 2017). A distinguishing characteristic of this paradigm is that attempts to gather detailed insights rather than aiming to determine exact universal laws (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020) while using and integrating the subjective experiences of participants (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Using the interpretivist paradigm as a theoretical lens is appropriate for this study as it allows the researcher to gain insights through the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Thanh & Thanh, 2015) and examine human behaviours in the context of socio-cultural issues (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022) such as the decolonisation of higher education. These experiences enabled the researchers to develop their understanding (Thanh & Thanh, 2015) of what it means to be an academic in higher education during decolonisation of higher education.

1.5 Outline of Methodology

This study employs a qualitative systematic review to synthesise previous research on decolonisation in higher education, focusing on social science academics in South Africa. Using advanced and manual search techniques (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020) in databases like EBSCOhost and Google Scholar, the research draws on publications from 2016-2024, following significant student protests. Data collection involves extracting relevant constructs and using The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) flow diagram checklist for transparency, while qualitative content analysis identifies thematic categories (Lame, 2019; McMahon et al., 2022; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020; Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). Quality assurance emphasises rigour and replicability, and trustworthiness is achieved through criteria like dependability, credibility, and transferability, supported by reflexive journaling and peer review to ensure thorough, reliable findings (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020; Snyder, 2019).

Qualitative research is an interpretive approach used to understand social phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020) by exploring participants' perceptions and experiences in real-world contexts, employing flexible and multidimensional methods like phenomenology, grounded theory, and case studies to capture complex social realities; qualitative systematic reviews further integrate findings from multiple studies (Butler et al., 2016), offering comprehensive insights and synthesised interpretations that can inform policymakers and practitioners (Chapman, 2021; McMahon et al., 2022; Snyder, 2019). This study employs an internet-based research setting, drawing on existing online materials as data sources (Cilliers & Viljoen, 2020) to explore decolonisation in South African higher education. Given time and resource limitations, the systematic review focuses narrowly on social science academics' perspectives, aiming for depth over breadth (Thomas et al., 2019). Qualitative sampling emphasises the criterion-based selection of information-rich cases meeting criteria like topic relevance and contextual richness, with data saturation determining sample size (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Salmons, 2022). Studies included were published between 2016-2024, following major student protests in South Africa.

According to Flemming and Noyes (2021), the scope of the systematic review should be decided before the review question can be determined. Scope relates to the type of boundaries around the review which will frame the topic of interest and illustrate the existent literature available. The scope of this research was narrow as time and other resources were limited. A systematic review with a narrow scope is more manageable and easier to read. The disadvantage of a narrow scope is the possibility that the evidence may be sparse (Thomas et al., 2019). The review focused on understanding how decolonisation efforts in higher education are perceived, experienced, and enacted by social science academics. It only included studies relevant to the South African context.

In this study, data extraction and analysis were conducted using an integrative synthesis approach, which was aligned with the objectives of the review and its qualitative evidence synthesis (QES) methodology (Booth et al., 2018). Data were extracted through a two-stage process, first gathering contextual details—such as study setting, population

characteristics, and methodology—and then the findings, including participant quotes, researcher observations, and emerging themes (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach, starting with line-by-line coding, followed by the development of descriptive themes, and ultimately progressing to the formation of analytical themes (Flemming et al., 2019; Flemming & Noyes, 2021). The interpretivist paradigm shaped the study, emphasising subjective experiences and contextual nuances in academics' views on decolonisation (Booth et al., 2016). Findings focused on descriptive insights, uncovering recurring themes and patterns across the studies without extending into theoretical generation. This methodology is valuable for exploring multifaceted experiences in educational settings, aiming to inform understanding of decolonisation's implications across social sciences.

1.6 Definition of Key Concepts

This section defines the key concepts based on the objectives of the study.

1.6.1 Decolonisation

Decolonisation typically refers to the process by which a country that was once a colony under foreign control gains political independence. However, decolonisation also extends beyond political sovereignty, encompassing self-determination that frees societies from colonial ideologies, egocentric perspectives, and material greed (Nakagawa, 2021). The decolonisation process, as a renewal across political, economic, social, technological, and educational spheres, emphasises reclaiming indigenous knowledge to drive sustainable development and counter Western cultural dominance, with social sciences and humanities playing an important role in redefining African identity and inspiring transformation despite contemporary challenges (Lebakeng, 2018).

In the social sciences, decolonisation refers to the process of critically re-evaluating, challenging, and transforming knowledge, practices, and structures that are rooted in colonial perspectives and power dynamics. It involves questioning whose knowledge is valued, the sources of that knowledge, and how it is taught, researched, and applied. Decolonisation aims to make social sciences more inclusive and representative of diverse

voices, particularly those from historically marginalised or colonised communities. This process may include revising curricula to incorporate indigenous and non-Western perspectives, rethinking research methods and ethics, fostering critical pedagogy, and changing institutional policies that perpetuate inequality. Ultimately, decolonisation in social sciences seeks to create an academic environment that is more equitable, contextually relevant, and respectful of various ways of perceiving and interpreting the world.

1.6.2 Pedagogy

Pedagogy refers to the dynamic interactions among teachers, students, the learning environment, and tasks, encompassing the visible curriculum, hidden curriculum, teaching methods, and instructional planning. This definition emphasises the relationships between teacher and student, peer interactions, the teacher's adaptable style, and students' cognitive approaches, with the assessment process also shaping both content and methods of instruction (Murphy & Gipps, 1996). In other words, pedagogy is the various ways that instructors and students work with the course content (Kaldis, 2013).

1.6.3 Curriculum

A curriculum is a systematic plan of educational content and activities created to accomplish particular learning objectives for students (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2003). It includes the subjects, materials, activities, assessments, and teaching methods used within an educational program to guide and evaluate learning. A curriculum reflects the goals, values, and standards of an educational institution or system and provides a roadmap for educators to deliver and assess instruction effectively (Vereijken & Van Der Rijst, 2021).

1.6.4 Academics

For this study, the term academics relates to individuals engaged in teaching, research, and scholarly activities within higher education institutions, particularly those in the social sciences. These academics contribute to knowledge production, curriculum development, and pedagogy, and serve as a key force in driving and executing decolonisation initiatives within educational settings (Shahjahan et al., 2021).

1.6.5 Social Sciences

Social science is an academic field that studies human behaviour within social and cultural contexts, examining the dynamics of social life, groups, and societies (Calhoun, 2009). Major branches of social science include but are not limited to psychology, developmental studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, and theology (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004), alongside disciplines like public health, education, urban planning, and public policy, all focused on understanding various aspects of human interactions and societal structures (Benton & Craib, 2023).

1.7 Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured into six chapters. Chapter one offers an introduction to the dissertation, while chapter two presents a review of the relevant literature. Chapter three discusses the theoretical framework adopted for the study, and chapter four outlines the methodology employed. Chapter five highlights the findings of the research, and chapter six provides a discussion of these findings along with the conclusion of the dissertation.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the structure and content of the dissertation. The next chapter will review the existing literature on the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The main objective of this chapter is to present a comprehensive review of the literature on decolonisation. It explores the concept of decolonisation, the challenges associated with it, its application within South African higher education, and the role of academics in driving decolonisation. It offers insights into what a decolonised pedagogy and curriculum might entail.

2.2 Decolonisation: Definitions, origin, significance, and challenges

As a concept, decolonisation is used in multiple and different disciplines, such as education and psychology (Asadullah, 2021) and contexts: settler colonies, post-colonial colonies, and colonial metropolises (Stein et al., 2021). Decolonisation can be understood as multiple attempts to resist the interconnected outcomes of colonisation. It aims to create an alternative future that is inclusive and just (Woldegiorgis, 2021). To define decolonisation, it is necessary to consider the different views of various scholars on the concept (Asadullah, 2021) as it is understood differently by individuals in other contexts with various cultural, material, epistemic, political, and economic dimensions (Adefila et al., 2022) and therefore, has diverse (Sadiki & Steyn, 2022) and multiple (Le Grange, 2019) meanings. The concept has been used to interrogate the consequences of colonialism and its continued impact on institutions, structures and epistemologies (Woldegiorgis, 2021). Decolonisation has become a fashionable word, often repeated because it sounds impressive, but it can be misused to further colonisation rather than dismantle it. Trendy terms such as “epistemic violence” (Held, 2020, p.352), “epistemic justice” (Walker, 2018, p.264), “transformation” (Fomunyan & Rahming, 2017, p.2), “neoliberalism” (Maistry & Le Grange, 2023, p.433), and “knowledge production” (Hoadley & Galant, 2019, p.133) frequently appear in academic writing, where they are commonly used but have yet to be defined or fully understood (Muller, 2023).

According to Woldegiorgis (2021), there are two commonly recognised prerequisites for decolonisation to exist within a specific context, namely a colonial experience and enduring the power dynamics of colonialism, or what the author terms *coloniality of power* (p.896) as originally coined by Quijano (2000, p.216). The coloniality of power can be understood as the historical process European colonists used to develop racialised hierarchies of individuals and knowledge systems to legitimise oppression (Woldegiorgis, 2021). According to Sayed et al. (2019), decolonisation has no endpoint but is instead positioned as a point of reference for continuous struggle.

2.2.1 Origin of decolonisation: colonialism, colonisation

Decolonisation has an extensive intellectual history (Sadiki & Steyn, 2022). It has been used in the past to refer to anti-colonial efforts as early as the 1950s to signify the struggle for freedom from the legacy of colonialism (Adefila et al., 2022). It gained popularity in the 1960s through the writings of Frantz Fanon (Fanon, 1963, as cited in Sadiki & Steyn, 2022) and later in the 1980s through the writings of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Thiong'o, 1986, as mentioned in Sadiki & Steyn, 2022). Thiong'o spoke about the importance of decolonising memory, history, and language, of which language is the vital starting point, not geopolitics (Mamdani, 2019; Sadiki & Steyn, 2022). Colonialism, according to Rizvi (2019), included physical violence as well as cultural and symbolic destruction by depriving subjugated individuals of their moral agency. Colonised individuals' knowledge systems were discounted as irrelevant in the quest for modernisation.

Textual analysis conducted by Shaik and Kahn (2021) for their research on understanding the challenges faced in the decolonisation of higher education found six elements of the discourse on decoloniality. The first element is *epistemicide* (p. 974), which refers to the invalidation of the African identity and scholarship. What Held (2019) calls *epistemic violence* (p.350) derives from the tendencies in mainstream psychology (and other social sciences) to leave out the ideas and thoughts of "othered people" (p.350) and to interpret observable differences between groups as being caused by the intrinsic inferiorities of these individuals. Hungwe and Ndofirepi (2022) refer to these tendencies as *epistemic*

injustice (p.56) caused by what the authors call *hermeneutical* and *testimonial injustice* (p.56). Testimonial injustice happens when credibility is not given to the speaker because of prejudices the listener holds. In other words, the speaker's social group causes the listener to judge the speaker as unreliable. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a specific society's knowledge systems are deliberately trivialised. An interpretive example of this is the elements of the African perspective, such as ancestral spirits and witchcraft, which is still dismissed by many Western worldviews in the social sciences (Hungwe & Ndofirepi, 2022). Decolonisation could reveal how indigenous practices and knowledge continue to suffer from epistemic violence (Chankseliani, 2020).

The second aspect identified in the decolonial discourse was inequality. It specifically points to the deep-rooted establishment of economic and other disparities caused by Eurocentrism's strong presence within neo-liberalism and capitalism (Shaik & Kahn, 2021). The third element identified was what the authors called academic elitism. This refers to the hold academics who have historically been advantaged still have on the formal academic programmes presented at higher education institutions (Shaik & Kahn, 2021). The fourth element the textual analysis indicated was misalignment. Intellectual and cultural misalignment of programmes is illustrated by the lack of indigenous voices and experiences included in curricula, making many academic programmes unrelatable to students. Frames of reference should be considered, and content should be created by considering the lived realities of students (Shaik & Kahn, 2021). The fifth element is aesthetic estrangement. This is seen in the absence of indigenous iconography. Many students find teaching spaces alienating, where there is minimal effort to incorporate case studies, examples, real-world applications, or symbols that could make the academic content more relevant and engaging (Shaik & Kahn, 2021). The sixth element found was racism. Racism is endured by previously disadvantaged members of the academic community in subtle ways, but occasionally in overt forms (Shaik & Kahn, 2021).

In South Africa, crime is closely tied to poverty, which disproportionately affects black communities. Understanding poverty, however, requires an examination of wealth

distribution, as white individuals continue to hold the majority of economic power despite the growth of the black middle class (Milazzo, 2016). This inequality is further reinforced by colourblind ideologies that stem from nonracialism, a concept rooted in the ANC's anti-racist struggle but now used as a tool to suppress discussions on race while maintaining white dominance. Colourblind discourse downplays the role of institutional racism in shaping life opportunities, attributing economic disparities to class differences, individual merit, and personal responsibility. This perspective has significant consequences both in South Africa and globally, as it obscures the structural barriers that sustain inequality (Milazzo, 2016; Milazzo, 2019).

These entrenched disparities align with the six elements of decolonial discourse—epistemicide, inequality, academic elitism, misalignment, aesthetic estrangement, and racism (Shaik & Kahn, 2021)—which collectively uphold colonial power structures in knowledge, education, and society. Epistemicide, the systematic erasure of indigenous knowledge, perpetuates inequality by marginalising alternative intellectual traditions (Hadi et al., 2023), while academic elitism reinforces Western epistemologies and excludes non-Western perspectives. This exclusion leads to misalignment, where education systems fail to reflect local realities, and aesthetic estrangement, where non-Western cultural expressions are devalued (Abumere, 2024). At the core of these dynamics is racism, which justifies epistemicide (Hadi et al., 2023), sustains economic disparities, and upholds elitist academic gatekeeping (Rizvi, 2022). These interconnected forces sustain coloniality and systemic inequality, underscoring the urgent need for decolonial efforts that reclaim indigenous knowledge, promote epistemic justice, and dismantle racial and economic hierarchies.

2.2.2 Dimensions of decolonisation

Kessi et al. (2020) identified four interconnected dimensions of decolonisation namely epistemic, personal, relational and structural. The first dimension, the epistemic dimension, relates to the epistemicide element identified by Shaik and Kahn (2021). Epistemic decolonisation refers to the restoration of theories and perspectives which are not centred around European or American theory. It challenges the notion that scientific

knowledge is inherently objective, universally rational, and applicable to all contexts (Kessi et al., 2020).

Personal decolonisation focuses on the interaction with disobedient decolonial practices and cultivating consciousness (Kessi et al., 2020). Relational decolonisation recognises human agency and the interdependence of all individuals on each other. It requires individuals to consistently focus on actively fostering equity, mutuality, and reciprocity, challenging established privilege and power daily (Kessi et al., 2020). This dimension relates to the element of racism identified by Shaik and Kahn (2021). Structural decolonisation relates to the reopening and redistribution of opportunities and material resources (Kessi et al., 2020). This dimension relates strongly to what Shaik and Khan (2021) called the inequality element, academic elitism, and misalignment.

In the context of higher education, decolonisation is a process aimed at broadening access and including groups that were previously disadvantaged and excluded. Inclusion goes beyond mere physical access to educational institutions, extending to the recognition of diverse ways of knowing, being, and the ongoing generation and sharing of knowledge (Woldegiorgis, 2021). As emphasised by Nsizwazonke (2020), decolonisation is ultimately a psychological process which should lead to change in the economic, cultural, social, spiritual, and educational facets of life. Or as Adams (2022) stated, there is a need for mental decolonisation.

It is crucial to differentiate between the concepts of decolonisation and transformation, as it is not the same thing. According to Sadiki and Steyn (2022), transformation occurs when a curriculum is created which is reactive to its social context and attempts to give priority to the knowledge systems, voices and narratives which was formerly marginalised. Decolonisation is a complex process that goes beyond simply substituting Western viewpoints with African ones. It entails examining the power dynamics involved in knowledge production, understanding how it connects to Africanisation, and addressing the colonial foundations that support the curriculum (Sadiki & Steyn, 2022). Even though most of the colonised countries gained independence, the concepts and ideas colonialism presented

are still mostly in play (Nsizwazonke, 2020). Decolonisation does not have to equal the destruction of current knowledge structures (Le Grange, 2016), but rather should place Africa and African perspectives as the focal point of research, teaching, and learning (Sadiki & Steyn, 2022).

2.2.3 Challenges of decolonisation: practical, political and conceptual

According to Rizvi (2019), the challenges of decolonisation are practical, political, as well as conceptual. Practical challenges are concerned with the difficulty of altering entrenched systems, especially in contexts that lack the resources to satisfy the demands for equality. Political challenges consist of the resistance of powerful players who do not wish to disrupt the status quo as well as embedded colonial legacies in the system that are challenging to identify. According to the author, conceptual challenges are even more complex as the definition of decolonisation is unclear and can be understood in numerous ways (Rizvi, 2019). Problems of agency is one of the core challenges experienced in the decolonisation of higher education institutions. In a commitment to the Western identity, values such as materialism, individualism, rationalism and personal freedom can be constricting to a sense of agency.

When adopting a decolonial approach to the curriculum, the designing and delivering of indigenous studies is fundamentally political. Indigenous approaches to doing, being and knowing (p.262) emphasise the shortcomings within disciplinary practices and thinking. Developing cultural competency should align with student learning outcomes. A curriculum that adopts a decolonial approach, should be based on conscientisation and critical pedagogy (Castell et al., 2018). According to Long (2018), the biggest issue with decolonisation is its reputation as an empty signifier. As Zwane (2019) points out, many universities are only superficially promoting decolonisation rather than actively engaging with it.

Lumadi (2021) argued that there has never been, nor will there ever be, a universally accepted agreement among universities on what constitutes the decolonisation of the curriculum. The different views and interests of higher education's stakeholders, the

argument of what exactly decolonisation and the transformation of curricula entails, changes every year from one academic to another. This makes the process of decolonisation of higher education in South Africa increasingly difficult and complex, several challenges to decolonisation arise, including debates over ideas versus location, excellence versus relevance, academic freedom versus justice, and the tension between universal education and anti-colonial nationalism (Jansen, 2019). Additionally, Senekal and Lenz (2020) identified a lack of intellectual authorities and content, the perceived superiority of Western knowledge, time, and resistance to change as challenges of decolonisation.

Le Grange (2019) identifies several factors that have hindered the decolonisation of higher education, including the rise of neoliberalism, the expansion of the sector, and the focus on performance metrics. The division between higher education institutions in South Africa reflects a broader tension between relevance and excellence. Historically white institutions, which were focused on excellence, used this to maintain their networks, privileges, and academic independence. In contrast, historically black institutions lacked the same level of academic freedom and faced greater challenges in securing such autonomy (Sayed et al., 2019).

2.2.4 Decolonisation and the challenges of globalisation and academic freedom

One of the challenges of decolonisation identified by Motala et al. (2021) relates to the enhancement of substantial epistemic access. According to the authors, epistemic access to academic programmes continues to be restricted. The issue seems to be that either the process of decolonisation is individual and implicit, or it is a formal institution-wide process. When the process of decolonisation takes place on an individual level, it relies on the decision of single academics. The experience of decolonisation on this level is uneven and has several weaknesses. Where the process is formalised and on an institutional level, the experience of the process is that the decolonisation process is more a symbolic gesture and takes a top-down approach (Motala et al., 2021). Another issue of the decolonisation process is the ongoing disconnect between national and institutional agenda-setting, coupled with sluggish progress toward achieving transformation and decolonisation goals,

which persist in hindering efforts to implement effective changes in teaching and learning programs (Motala et al., 2021).

The primary challenge of decolonisation, according to Nsizwazonke (2020), is that higher education institutions seem to be "Janus-faced" (p. 277). On one hand, higher education institutions have adopted internationalisation as a key response to the growing global university community. On the other hand, they must preserve their independence and make decisions that align with the specific needs of their local societies. Based on a buyer-seller model, education is treated as a commodity to be packaged and sold in both national and international marketplaces (Nsizwazonke, 2020). What Long (2018) calls the *marketisation* (p.23) of knowledge production has resulted in the assembly-line production of newly graduated students who are quickly incorporated into the market-friendly economy. Lange (2019) raised thought-provoking questions on the matter: Are there pedagogical limitations to an identity-based approach to the curriculum? How does this align with the necessity of teaching global knowledge?

Another issue raised by Olsson (2023) is the tension between academic freedom and decolonisation. The author argues that implementing a decolonised curriculum and policies could lead to actions that restrict freedom of speech, invite government interference, and violate academic freedoms by imposing prescribed doctrines. The themes of decolonisation such as purging academic content of offensive ideas and characters, making the curriculum relevant to everyday South Africans, making it more African-centred, and other themes related to decolonisation have been raised in the past, are still being raised now, and will be raised again in the future according to Jansen (2017).

2.3 The South African Context: Colonialism and Coloniality

Colonisation has multiple characterisations (Ajani et al., 2022) and, according to Stein et al. (2021), the precise character of colonialism can differ depending on the context shaped by its internal political and historical dynamics. To understand the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa, it is crucial to first explore the country's colonial and

apartheid history, particularly in relation to knowledge, academia, and the higher education system (Heleta, 2018).

It is necessary to distinguish between the concepts of coloniality and colonialism. Firstly, colonialism points to an economic and political interaction where the sovereignty of the country is based on the power of a different country or empire. Looking from a historical point of view, the imperialist country dictates its cultural, economic, political, and administrative authority onto the colonised country. In comparison, coloniality refers to the implied and obvious continuation of colonialism which still occurs even after the legitimate end of colonialism (Hungwe & Ndofirepi, 2022).

Andreotti et al. (2015) argue that coloniality functions as a system that governs the organisation and allocation of epistemic, aesthetic, and material resources, thereby sustaining the imperial agenda of modernity. It relates to the occupation, domination, and often the settlement of a specific geographical area by strangers from another location (Adams, 2022). As stated by Stein et al. (2021), colonialism is an inherent part of modernity which reduced individuals' existence to a pre-assigned value within society. This modernity sanctioned the exploitation and expropriation of humans for profit, defined knowledge as a collection of universal facts about the world that can be gathered and absorbed, and aimed to portray the world according to these universal truths as a way of controlling it (Stein et al., 2021). What the authors call intellectual economy (p.49) is powered by a feeling of entitlement to epistemic certainty and universalism. Colonialism relates to the global power structure and ideology linked to European imperial dominance, which at its core was unjust, oppressive and violent (Adams, 2022).

2.3.1 The South African Context: Colonialism and the Modern University

Knowledge is power. Society is built by power, and by those who have this power (Fomunyam & Rahming, 2017). South Africa is in desperate need of social transformation and according to these authors, education is the appropriate place to begin. Education should be seen as the primary instrument that can be used to empower and train individuals to give them the necessary tools to transform their societies (Fomunyam & Rahming, 2017).

Universities' institutional form is designed according to the colonial modern model which was based on discipline, gated communities and a strong hierarchical system which made definite distinctions between clearly differentiated groups (academics, administration, and students) (Mamdani, 2019). As Europe expanded its reach and sought to conquer the world, it aimed to transform and “civilise” (p. 50) in its image. The social and the humanities both declared the oneness of humanity while defining that oneness as sameness viewed from a European perspective (Mamdani, 2019).

The success of the social sciences during the European Enlightenment was due to their ability to bridge the distance between the object and subject through methodical knowledge production and the clarification and categorisation of fundamental differences between those who could be subjects and those who seemed closer to nature and thereby could be the object of investigation (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). This led to multiple breakthroughs in how human beings were understood (Maldonado-Torres, 2017), yet it led to a division between what was standard or normal and what was perceived as different (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Mamdani, 2019). Furthermore, according to Mamdani (2019), theory is born of comparison. Knowledge production begins with the arranging of phenomena and comparison means mapping and classifying. For ordering to be possible there must be a reference point, which inevitably became the West. Segalo and Cakata (2017) argue that the strong inclination to define and understand human existence in simplistic, universal terms oversimplifies and masks the true complexities of being human. The concepts of being civilised, modern, and human were imposed on the colonised by imperialist powers (Heleta, 2016).

2.3.2 The South African Context: The Apartheid Era

Openly racist policies created economic and social inequalities during the apartheid regime. Policies such as the Group Areas Act of 1950 which determined where persons of colour were allowed to live and work, and the Bantu Education Act of 1952 ensured that persons of colour received inadequate education to ensure these inequalities. Substandard Bantu education was specifically planned and created in a way which would restrict the

development and prospects of previously disadvantaged communities to limit them to a lower socioeconomic status. It furthermore had the goal of preventing access to higher education and forcing persons of colour into jobs which only required basic skills or forms of labour (Albertus, 2019). During this time, South Africans came to identify themselves according to the racial classification legislation and most South Africans still identify themselves according to this system (Frizelle, 2019).

2.3.3 The South African Context: The Post-apartheid Era

Heleta (2016) contends that while political freedom was attained in 1994, enduring inequalities, structural imbalances, and injustices continue to limit the freedom of South Africans, with higher education serving as one of these barriers. In post-apartheid South Africa, all racial groups are legally entitled to access education at every level; however, due to the lasting impact of apartheid policies, higher education remains inaccessible to many previously disadvantaged communities (Albertus, 2019). Furthermore, apartheid still manifests in the methodology, epistemologies, ontology, patriarchy, gender biases and racism found at South African universities (Sadiki & Steyn, 2022). As Albertus (2019) states, institutional racism, and other social injustices, unfortunately, did not die along with apartheid.

So why the need for decolonisation in South Africa? According to Le Grange (2019), the decolonisation of South Africa's university curricula is necessary because the knowledge systems of the colonised were decimated and therefore cognitive justice is required; the false belief that Eurocentric knowledge systems can be applied universally should be discredited; the Global South's knowledge systems were discounted and this should be remedied; there is a pressing desire for a psychosocial transformation of those who were previously colonised, and universities must adopt a South African model of academic organisation (Le Grange, 2019).

2.4 Decolonisation in South Africa's Higher Education

Higher education in South Africa is complex, fraught with inequalities and lacking in personnel and adequate resources (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). As Becker (2017) states, South Africa finds itself at the intersection of overlapping local and global histories; between knowledge and identity (Lange, 2019). Apart from South Africa's political struggles and landscape, the educational space of the country can qualify as one of the most neglected areas (Nsizwazonke, 2020). South African universities have a dual obligation: to undergo their own process of decolonisation and to play an active role in the wider societal decolonial movement (Chikoko, 2021).

The post-1994 curriculum focused on its external structuring rather than paying attention to the knowledge within. Government policies and statutory bodies did not promote meaningful conversations with academics on whether the knowledge contained in the curricula was the kind appropriate and necessary to support the democratic transition in South Africa (Lange, 2019). Almost thirty years after South Africa was freed from the shackles of apartheid, imperial practices and neo-colonialist structural imbalances remain in higher education (Sadiki & Steyn, 2022) and it remains a racialised space (Frizelle, 2019). According to Nsizwazonke (2020), every educational system is a tool employed by those in power to enforce conformity; and the current imbalance between the country's educational system and the present political system is a recipe for disaster. Decolonisation in South Africa addresses the unfinished business of the transformation of higher education.

Lange (2019) proposes that the decolonisation of the curriculum should be viewed as a dual process, one that challenges both the academic curriculum and the institutional curriculum. The academic curriculum here refers to the engagement of staff and students with identity, knowledge and behaviour in the context of various disciplines. This involves conflicting approaches, traditions, methodology, boundaries, and focus; and includes the rules of knowledge production of the specific discipline. Institutional curriculum, according to the author, is the knowledge concealed in the dominant behaviours, beliefs and values deeply entrenched in every area of institutional life. The institutional curriculum is something

that one is socialised into; it is not explicitly taught in academic content, but is taught through the relationships between lecturers and students, classroom behaviour, and the ideals conveyed implicitly through symbols, attitudes, traditions, and names (Lange, 2019).

The implicit and tacit identity of the institutional curriculum has meant that individuals who do not share the same cultural, linguistic or social character often feel out of place (Lange, 2019). Early scientific literature racialised the concept of *other*, justified through perceived differences from the European man. The othered subject often emerged as inhuman, less-than-human, or sub-human (Kessi et al., 2021, p. 123). Scientific concepts about the other often transform into popular beliefs, perpetuating discrimination and oppression that are frequently based on race, class, and gender (Kessi, 2017). Intellectual and cultural othering is frequently mentioned in discourse on decolonisation. This phenomenon occurs when the intellectual and cultural traditions of colonised peoples are disregarded or undermined (Shaik & Kahn, 2021). According to Long (2018), students often feel a profound sense of dislocation and a feeling of “otherness” (p.23) when entering higher education institutions as it is filled with spaces that are severely alienating. As Becker (2017) confirms, there exists a cycle of continuous othering and alienation within South African higher education institutions.

2.5 The Student Protests and the Rebirth of Decolonisation in South Africa

Since the end of apartheid, the demand for social justice, equality, and equity has remained a critical concern within South Africa's higher education system (Albertus, 2019) and before that, the anti-colonial struggles (Jansen, 2019). The student protests of 2015 and 2016 added a new buzzword (Pillay, 2017; Sibanda, 2021) to the vocabulary of South Africans: decolonisation (Adefila et al., 2022; Jansen, 2019). The protests shattered the fantasy of a rainbow nation being able to live happily ever after in a democracy (Becker, 2017).

The student unrest renewed the interest in and heightened the demands for the decolonisation of higher education institutions in South Africa (Le Grange, 2019; Pillay & Swanepoel, 2019), as well as highlighting issues regarding institutional racism, exclusion,

and access (Sadiki & Steyn, 2022). The movement sought to dispute the dead white men rhetoric that was (and still is) prevalent in curricula (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021) as well as investigate continuous patterns of the reproduction of colonial ways of knowing (Stein et al., 2021).

According to Le Grange (2016), the student protests were proof of the class struggle that still exists in South African universities. This sentiment is echoed by Sayed et al. (2019) who stated that the student protests highlighted the divide between South Africa's higher education institutions which is caused by class as much as racial identity. The decolonisation movement, as Long (2018, p.20) names it, became a supposed place of hope for radical change in higher education. It created unease amongst some faculty and students for it adopted a race-based rationale to drive its demands. As Lockett (2023) puts it, the student protest movement embraced a racial and social lens to legitimise its political stance and to unite gendered and classed factions of students.

Long (2018) suggests that the persistent focus on dialogue about decolonisation reflects a repetition compulsion, which will continue until the structural and material inequalities created by apartheid—such as land dispossession and economic exclusion—are meaningfully addressed (Adams, 2022). However, critiques have emerged regarding how student protestors framed their demands. Long (2018) argues that instead of grounding their struggles in principles of equality, dignity, and security, protestors centred their discourse on black pain and white privilege. This, according to the author, led to perceptions that their concerns were less radical and more aligned with “middle-class anxieties” (p. 22). Similarly, Jansen (2017) contends that the discourse on decolonisation in South African universities quickly lost historical depth and conceptual clarity, often becoming a racialised tool to challenge perceived opponents including university structures and curricula.

Yet, these critiques must also be understood within the broader context of neoliberal university structures, which prioritise financial sustainability and institutional reputation over transformative change. The push for decolonisation emerged in a system that, some argue, inherently resists radical reform by redirecting focus towards economic viability rather than

systemic redress. This raises the question of whether the limitations of the movement were due to the framing of student arguments or the structural constraints of the university itself (Long, 2018).

2.6 Decolonisation and Higher Education Institutions

Although universities across South Africa have devised and implemented new frameworks and policies relating to equity, equality, change and transformation, institutional cultures remain much the same (Costandius et al., 2018; Pillay & Swanepoel, 2019), very little has been done to interrupt or challenge colonial as well as apartheid epistemological practices (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021) and many universities have faced challenges in becoming more [multiculturally sensitive](#) and in better serving a diversified student body (Sadiki & Steyn, 2022).

The apartheid legacy resulted in the establishment of different types of higher education institutions (Kessi, 2017) and was structurally influenced by its racialised and conservative logic (Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2019). Universities, as places of teaching, research, and debate, play a vital part in the production (and reproduction) and distribution of knowledge (Khoo et al., 2020) which is influenced by the philosophical, methodological, and theoretical views of stakeholders (Fomunyam & Rahming, 2017). Furthermore, education and the production of knowledge play a vital part in the replication of colonisation (Adefila et al., 2022), and the reproduction of racism, Eurocentrism, sexism, and other inequalities (Rizvi, 2019). Therefore, higher education institutions should cater to every section of the population, especially to the groups that were excluded and oppressed in the past (Rizvi, 2019). Decolonisation of higher education institutions has frequently consisted of cosmetic or superficial changes (such as renaming buildings) (Lange, 2019; Sadiki & Steyn, 2022) without concrete structural adjustments, and the continued failure of the current curriculum to empower students, answer contextual issues and ensure a plurality of voices remains a reason for concern (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). Makhele (2018) then poses the question of what decolonisation means and how can it be achieved. The meaning and importance of decolonisation in South Africa's higher education is still uncertain as there are various

conflicting views on how to approach the project of decolonisation (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). Pillay and Swanepoel (2019) propose reconsidering the ways of knowing the current curriculum and reconstruction of epistemologies with the primary goal of reflecting the transformation in what is being taught and how it is being taught. According to Makhele (2018), one way of decolonising higher education in South Africa is to implement African principles such as ecology, reciprocity, communalism, relationality, cooperation, association, and spirituality (Makhele, 2018). Or, as stated by Pillay and Swanepoel (2019), it involves ensuring that the curriculum reflects and is rooted in the African context. Fomunyam and Teferra (2017) further emphasise the importance of responding from a perspective that is economically responsive, disciplinary responsive, and culturally responsive. Hlatshwayo and Alexander (2021) argue that a broader understanding of the transformation of curricula is needed that moves beyond pre-colonial, indigenous, monolithic, and nativist conceptions of blackness.

2.7 The Phases of the Decolonisation Process

Stein et al. (2021) suggest that decolonisation demands a long-term commitment and a comprehensive approach. It can be understood through five phases: rediscovery and recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment, and action. During the initial phase, rediscovery and recovery, colonised communities reclaim their language, culture, history, and identity. During the mourning phase, the continued assault on colonised peoples' social realities and identities is lamented. This mourning is a vital part of healing and ultimately guides individuals towards dreaming. Dreaming, the third phase occurs when colonised peoples call upon their own perspectives, histories, and Indigenous knowledge systems to hypothesise and conceive alternate possibilities than what is accepted or suggested as universal truths. Commitment is shown when students and academics actively engage as advocates, ensuring the inclusion of the perspectives of the colonised. Action takes place when dreaming and commitment is translated into social transformation strategies (Le Grange, 2016).

2.8 The Application of the Decolonisation Process in Higher Education

The goal of decolonising higher education is just to import theories from external sources, but rather to develop theories that reflect our own lived reality. This involves a balanced approach to knowledge production, integrating both local perspectives and global discourses (Mamdani, 2019). According to Fomunyam and Teferra (2017), South African higher education has many goals, including cost-effectiveness, relevance to the South African context, transformation, national development, and poverty alleviation (Fomunyam, 2016). To reach these goals and ensure quality education, Fomunyam (2016) advises that university staff need to be continuously developed, support needs to be provided to students and curriculum design should include input from students. As Stein et al. (2021) state, higher education needs to view decolonisation as a challenging, messy, and continuous process.

A major challenge in higher education, particularly in South Africa, is to be able to react to the local context while still being focused on the global context (Mamdani, 2019). Decolonisation and transformation at universities will not only affect the universities themselves, but will also have an impact on surrounding communities and the nation in general. It is therefore important for universities to offer quality education that can make significant contributions to societal improvement and growth (Fomunyam, 2016). The decolonisation project, as Hungwe and Ndofirepi (2022) call it, is something that must be owned by all irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, nationality or any other social diversities. Furthermore, decolonisation must not be some revenge mission, but rather aim for the equal and mutual exchange of knowledge from various cultures and perspectives (Hungwe & Ndofirepi, 2022).

2.9 Decolonisation in the Social Sciences

The social sciences and their theories have been immensely formed by changing social structures and historical contexts (Chen, 2022). Recently histories of the social sciences have been re-thought in an attempt to decentre the West and broaden the imagination of social sciences (Chen, 2022). In the social sciences context, it is important to be aware of the core from which knowledge and theory are constructed (Woldegiorgis,

2021). In higher education social sciences, a harmful cycle persists, leading to exclusion and increasingly narrow perspectives on human nature (Oppong, 2019).

In their research, Morreira et al. (2020) explored how space and materiality can be utilised as teaching tools in social anthropology, and argued for the advancement of *emplacement pedagogies*. Teaching in social sciences mostly takes place in lecture halls and is separate from actual interactions with the material world. These spaces allow one expert academic citizen to lecture to numerous non-expert subjects which fulfil a requirement driven by economic and hierarchical considerations. Through pedagogies of emplacement place, materiality, and space can be used to deconstruct and relativise intrinsic perspectives on the Global South. Views from the South are placed at the centre of social sciences and students can locate themselves as integrated individuals within communities with political, social, and economic histories. This approach enables both academics and students to engage in reflective practices, helping students to be seen as active, knowledge-producing individuals within their communities, instead of passive recipients of knowledge imposed from external sources (Morreira et al., 2020).

2.10 Decolonisation in Social Science Research and Knowledge Creation

Reiter (2019) argues that the research methods and epistemologies within the social sciences are overly centred on North American and European perspectives and therefore require decolonisation. The Western scientific principles, according to the author, are based on colonial occupation, profiteering, and slavery and, therefore, do not consist of the essential tools to comprehend and assess the entire world. Western knowledge systems state there is only one narrow way of knowing which relies on neat and mutually exclusive categories and attributes (Reiter, 2019) and discredits collaborative or alternative knowledge systems as non-scientific, primitive, and unworthy (Sibanda, 2021). In this colonial arrogance (Reiter, 2019) Western knowledge systems declared that whatever cannot be grasped by reason, cannot be true and therefore does not exist. This insight does not explain human behaviour or social life as human reality cannot be explained by hard laws (Reiter, 2019). In other words, the current way of understanding humankind, culture, reality, and the world

needs to change (Makhele, 2018). Makhele (2018) proposed a new way, a better way, an African way of understanding these phenomena. To Africanise and decolonise higher education and its curriculum in South Africa, one effective approach is to integrate principles rooted in African culture and cosmology. Key concepts like communalism, ecology, relationality, spirituality, cooperation, reciprocity, and association can serve as foundational elements in developing an Africanised curriculum. These principles provide a framework that can guide the creation of a curriculum focused on social justice, communal values, ecological sustainability, and spiritual understanding (Makhele, 2018).

Decolonisation and Africanisation of higher education, and especially the social sciences (Heleta, 2016) would focus on a socio-centric and communalistic relationality which places value on the concept of Ubuntu, African humanism (Makhele, 2018) and enables a range of perspectives and diverse voices to contribute to shaping the evolution of the social sciences (Segalo & Cakata, 2017). The decolonisation of the social science curriculum and pedagogy should go beyond just studying previously marginalised languages and cultures; it should also emphasise developing skills in interpretation and negotiation for intercultural experiences (Rizvi, 2019). When writing on the field of sociology, Alatas and Sinha (2017) comment on the lack of non-Western and female perspectives in the histories of the formative years when sociological theory was being developed. The authors call for a fresh approach which is more critical and meaningful when teaching classical sociological theory. The tapestry of contributions to social theorising and thought is complex and the objective should be to open the door to a larger pool of inputs in addition to existing theories (Alatas & Sinha, 2017).

2.11 Decolonisation of Psychology as a Social Science

Discussions about decolonisation highlight psychology as a particularly problematic discipline (Long, 2018). Many in the field of psychology have recognised the misfit between African realities and the mainstream theories that inform their practice (Oppong, 2022). Historically, Western psychology has often been described as masquerading as universal psychology (Oppong, 2022, p. 954). The history of psychology as a field of study confirms

that the discipline only thrives under distinct social conditions. Many have tried decolonising psychology using an ahistorical approach by suggesting some study topics they believed would speak to the issue of Eurocentrism. These attempts failed as it does not allow for examining psychology's socially entrenched identity. The discipline is undoubtedly a modern creation that emerged from the social upheaval brought about by the Industrial Revolution (Long, 2018). Long (2018) goes as far as calling it "a discipline for followers" (p.23) who support the status quo. In African countries, psychology as a discipline is researched, taught and practised in a manner that adds to the epistemological violence and epistemic injustice in higher education institutions (Oppong, 2019).

Pillay (2017) asks the question of how psychology, as a field of inquiry, which at its core is aimed at understanding and benefiting people, failed so miserably at both during the apartheid regime. The author argues that indirectly and directly, psychologists assisted in the oppression of Black individuals and conspired with the unconstitutional apartheid regime (Pillay, 2017). Post-1994 psychology has been rebranded but is still removed from, and disconnected from the needs of the majority of South Africa's population (Pillay, 2017). Decolonisation, according to Pillay (2017), is something that a limited number of psychologists genuinely engage in.

Long (2016) states that the attempt to Africanise psychology has failed in the past 30 years. Firstly, the author argues, one of the reasons the attempts have failed is the fact that White psychologists avoid any awkward reminder of the Apartheid era and conversations about the potentially different psychological needs of Black Africans; therefore, not contributing to the African psychology project. Secondly, the Africanisation of psychology has failed in South Africa due to the preoccupation with what exactly it means to be African. As the author points out, the definition of being African is often outlined in a culturally and racially exclusive manner which makes it hard for non-Black individuals to envision their place in African psychology (Long, 2016). Decolonising psychology cannot be accomplished through the superficial rhetoric of Africanisation, but rather through analysing the conditions of oppression, such as class inequality, and the psychological effects that continue to affect

many South Africans (Long, 2016). Frizelle (2019) notes the intensified demand in the field of psychology for the acknowledgement and advancement of African psychology. These demands are the result of the dissatisfaction with psychology's excessive dependence on Euro-centric psychological theorists and theories (Frizelle, 2019). Oppong (2019) suggests that the lack of African content in psychology as an academic field in higher education may result from a genuine scarcity of African material to incorporate, a lack of interest in African content due to its absence from current psychological practice standards, and a reluctance to invest the time and effort needed to seek out relevant African content.

Nwoye (2015) asks the relevant question of what African psychology is then the psychology of. The author believes African psychology should be rooted in the assumptions of typical African perspectives. African psychology's distinctiveness lies in its comprehensive worldview, which perceives the universe as dynamic and interwoven with multiple realities—natural, abstract, and spiritual. The African worldview, reflected in the principle of Ubuntu, underscores the interdependence between individuals and their communities. African psychology draws on indigenous concepts of nature, humanity, life and death, knowledge, truth, perception, time, rationality, mystery, and spirituality. It recognises the interplay of material and spiritual realms and the influence of spiritual forces on human destiny. It also recognises the dynamic nature of human knowledge, the value of phenomenological experience, and the crucial role of spirituality in mental health (Nwoye, 2015).

The relatively young field of African psychology developed as a by-product of historical incidents within Africa. Many negative images of Africa as well as various stereotypes were shaped and cultivated by various of the seemingly respected European and North American thinkers. The Western psychology that was introduced did not aim to meaningfully engage with the psychological importance of key African traditions, such as reverence for ancestral spirits, kinship care, spirituality, and the connection between the everyday and the sacred. These traditions are deeply rooted in complementary dualism, which is central to the cosmology of many African cultures (Nwoye, 2015). In response to Nwoye's point, Ratele (2017) agrees with the call to advance African psychology, but

cautions that its potential growth is constrained by the belief that the concept is singular and unchanging. Instead, the author argues, it is important to recognise the multiple orientations various academics have towards psychology and Africa. According to Long (2018), if there is any hope of making psychology accessible to all South Africans, by Africanising, the author reminds us that the discipline has primarily only been available to those individuals who have entered modernity. Psychology, as a social science, should adopt a decolonising standpoint which comprehends the importance of the interaction between power and culture and recognises the discipline as both a product and a cultural practice (Castell et al., 2018).

As Frizelle (2019) points out, it is with this argument that Ratele (2017) highlights the need to create a space where everyone can contribute to the development of African-centred psychology in South Africa. Consequently, African psychology is not solely the domain or responsibility of black South Africans, but of all psychologists in the country (Frizelle, 2019). In addition to raising awareness about the colonial aspects of psychology, a decolonial approach aims to create and reclaim spaces and perspectives that expand, deepen, and highlight liberatory initiatives (Adams, 2022). Some in the field of psychology have also wondered why psychology cannot be all-inclusive; thereby creating psychology for all (Bastos et al., 2023; Berry, 2013; Ozer, 2019; Reese et al., 2015; Thalmayer et al., 2021) and ensuring that all voices are heard, rather than promoting one type of psychology at the expense of others; avoiding the classification of psychology into practices confined to a particular geographic region (Oppong, 2019). However, the claim of globalising psychology is false as it is not possible to project one way of life onto a global platform. Psychology can only become a science for all humans (Rad et al., 2018) and a genuinely global human science (Oppong, 2019) by broadening its scope and contributing to universal psychology.

2.12 Decolonisation of Social Sciences Programmes

In their research on Social Sciences Education Honours modules in a multidisciplinary context, Kgari-Masondo and Ngwenya (2020) offered detailed reflections from two lecturers on teaching at one university in South Africa. The research showed that the current approach to teaching multi-disciplinary courses is insufficient, as it fails to

incorporate diverse disciplinary expertise. To effectively teach these courses, educators need to be adaptable, innovative, and knowledgeable, with a deep understanding of diverse student needs and must engage in reflective practice to deliver high-quality teaching. Implementing border crossing pedagogy was suggested as a strategy to facilitate high-quality learning in multidisciplinary settings, as it enables the effective integration and intersection of diverse disciplinary perspectives (Kgari-Masondo & Ngwenya, 2020). Recent scientific advancements and methodological developments question the effectiveness of traditional, binary approaches to understanding reality. Instead, non-Western epistemologies offer a more suitable framework for embracing the complexities of reality, aligning with cutting-edge Western scientific theories. These perspectives recognise that the world is not rigidly discrete, and apparent contradictions can coexist or be reconciled at a higher level. Therefore, social sciences should embrace the complexity of multiple perspectives and avoid rigidly seeking a single, exclusive truth (Reiter, 2019).

Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021) emphasised the role of dialogue, critical reflection, the development of new methodologies, analysis, and changes in implementation as key strategies in their attempt to decolonise a social work program. The authors believed the journey toward decoloniality had only just begun. The initial steps towards the decolonisation of higher education curriculum involve unlearning, re-learning, and continuous reflection within higher education. Creating spaces for dialogue about inequality, coloniality and other forms of subjugation is crucial and applicable across various educational and societal contexts. The path to decoloniality is complex, uncomfortable, and challenging, requiring individuals to question existing power dynamics, hegemonies, and practices. It demands critical self-reflection and a commitment from educators to maintain ongoing reflexivity and adapt content and pedagogies accordingly. Despite having some autonomy in curriculum and pedagogy, academics are constrained by systemic colonial power structures within higher education and the broader South African context. These entrenched systems of coloniality, coupled with issues like poverty, inequality, and discrimination, pose significant obstacles. While the need for decoloniality is clear to some, there is also resistance and

pushback because such efforts aim to disrupt and challenge existing structural systems (Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021).

In their research focusing on the experiences of political science academics, Laakso and Adu (2023) revealed efforts to incorporate more local content and perspectives into teaching, aligning with university strategies. However, they viewed the academic decolonisation debate as overly ambitious or patronising within their political contexts. National politics influenced research topics and students' job prospects. University bureaucracy hindered curriculum changes, but programs with market demand were approved swiftly, often favouring international programs. Obstacles to decolonising the curriculum included reliance on foreign funding, a lack of sufficient national resources for research and publication, and adherence to national quality assurance standards (Laakso & Adu. 2023).

In their study on curriculum transformation in theological education and practical theology, Denny and Wepener (2021) found that pedagogy can serve as a tool for promoting equality in the classroom. An intercultural *pluriversal* pedagogy (a knowledge production process open to epistemic diversity) (p. 315) offers a new approach for lecturers in South African theological education, contributing to broader transformation. While many lecturers show a willingness and openness to modify their pedagogy, they often lack the skills to implement these changes effectively. Therefore, lecturers require training in cultural diversity, particularly in relation to the students in their classrooms (Denny & Wepener, 2021). In conducting research in the faculty of education, Mashiyi et al. (2020) examined lecturer perceptions and approaches to decolonising curricula in various subject matters. Findings included the belief that not all subjects can be decolonised and variations in approaches among lecturers teaching the same subjects. Recommendations for successful decolonisation included consultation and shared understanding, acknowledgement of colonial impacts, recognition of the interconnectedness of knowledge, and adoption of socio-cultural constructive perspectives. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches were proposed to facilitate collaborative learning and problem-solving (Mashiyi et al., 2020).

2.13 The Importance of the Decolonisation of Social Science Programmes

According to Lebakeng (2018), African communities must urgently confront the profound effects of foreign, particularly Euro-American, influence across political, social, aesthetic, and economic spheres, as well as in philosophical discourse. This influence has introduced incongruent ideas, concepts, orientations, and approaches that hinder progress toward achieving the *African Renaissance*. In the era of neo-colonialism in Africa, this disconnect has resulted in a lack of logical and organic conceptual alignment between African problems and challenges and the proposed solutions. Consequently, instead of pursuing radical social, economic, political, aesthetic, philosophical, and epistemological transformations rooted in African ontology, Africa has often embraced neo-liberal orthodoxies that either marginally address or exacerbate these issues (Lebakeng, 2018). Gukurume and Maringira (2020) contend that decolonising sociology is an ongoing process, advocating for the development of a "hybridised sociology" (p.60). Decolonising the curriculum according to the authors is marked by ambivalence as it is often obscured by emotional debates. The attempts at decolonisation have been problematic as it has held different meanings to various individuals (Gukurume & Maringira, 2020).

When writing on the experiences of a social scientist and research methodologies in the Global South, Chigevenga (2022) found that despite efforts to resist Western dominance in African research, Western philosophies still largely influence research conducted in Africa, reinforcing a power disparity between researchers from the Global North and the Global South. There is a call for African unity to produce research guided by African philosophies, emphasising the need for decolonisation of research methods. Indigenous knowledge systems, rooted in indigenous worldviews and cultural values, offer valuable insights for research benefiting local communities. Constructive discussions on knowledge systems are necessary to address exclusions and foster openness and integration. An African-centred research paradigm should be grounded in Ubuntu philosophy, acknowledging the spiritual resilience of local communities. African research should be communicated from African

perspectives, transcending Western views and limitations to embrace a holistic understanding of African experiences (Chigevenga, 2022).

2.14 The Role of Academics in the Decolonisation of Higher Education

For the decolonisation project to be successful, it needs to include more than just the decolonisation of the curriculum. How knowledge is taught by academics and their attitudes towards the decolonisation process matters greatly (Du Plessis, 2021). According to Adefila et al. (2022), academics and students are often unaware of the moral responsibility inherent in teaching and learning environments due to the various aspects of decolonisation. For social change to occur, academics' conceptions of privilege and power need to be challenged (Pillay & Swanepoel, 2019) and spaces need to be created wherein socially just and caring teaching and learning encounters can happen (Fomunyan & Teferra, 2017). As Hoadly and Galant (2019) emphasise, the way the student-academic relationship is formed and framed is a crucial element in the discourse on decolonisation. Academics have the responsibility of driving the decolonisation project and have a great influence on pedagogical methods, curriculum design processes, and the production of knowledge (Sibiya & Ndaba, 2023).

Academics are in a favourable position to become change agents (Sibiya & Ndaba, 2023) and should engage in academic activism (Kessi et al., 2020). In a society emerging from colonial rule like South Africa, it is the duty of the newly educated to take charge of the educational system and leverage it to create a more just and equitable society (Luckett, 2022). Academics, as agents of change, play a crucial role in transformation by recognizing their privilege, questioning dominant discourses, and actively challenging structural inequalities through their teaching, research, and institutional engagement, thereby fostering a consciousness that not only critiques but also seeks to dismantle oppressive systems (Idahosa & Vincent, 2018).

According to Sibanda (2021), academics are the most significant stakeholders in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating curricula. Thus, according to Rizvi (2019), they have a significant obligation to create learning spaces where critical

explorations of interconnectivity and interdependence and their influence on culture and identity can take place. This implies the necessity to create values of criticality and self-reflexivity to enable students to comprehend how identities are historically comprised and influenced by social dynamics and power relations (Rizvi, 2019). Costandius et al. (2018) propose using a bottom-up approach where teaching and learning initiatives should come from academics as opposed to from university management. The authors further argue that academics must realise that they are an integral part of the problems around them and urge for the practical task of self-transformation through humble experimentation (Costandius et al., 2018).

Due to the racial classifications of the apartheid regime, which most South Africans still use, the South African higher education context remains a racialised space which has an enormous impact on teaching and learning, as well as the everyday experiences of students as well as academics (Frizelle, 2019). Despite the increased number of university staff in recent years (Maphalala et al., 2022), and the positive change in racial demographics (Frizelle, 2019), demographic representation has not been realised (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). The stark reality at universities is the imbalance that still exists in the institutional hierarchies of universities (Alharahsheh, 2019). Instruction and research staff at public higher education institutions in South Africa, as of 2021, are 38% White while only 7.8% of the total population of South Africa is White (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023) while Black academics and researchers are only 45% of the staff, meanwhile, this population group makes 80.9% of the country's population (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023; Maphalala et al., 2022). What is worse, according to Albertus (2019), many non-white academics are made to think and feel as if they are not good enough because of regularly being overlooked, underestimated, and undermined. Furthermore, job opportunities are reserved for previously advantaged individuals and unrealistic expectations are often placed on historically disadvantaged academics.

Writing from a post-humanist approach to education, Postma (2020) argued that the educator's role is not to deliver predetermined information to students, contrasting with Biesta's (2017) view that something meaningful must be conveyed. When the educator's agency is minimised in educational settings, it allows for the creation of meanings beyond the educator's control. This occurs amid an epistemic crisis where the line between academic knowledge and misinformation is blurred. Higher education should foster diverse understandings by encouraging students to think and know differently from imposed knowledge forms, aligning with the challenge of colonial and neoliberal contexts. The pedagogy of spatial interferences can resist epistemic obedience and validate the intellectual equality of the Global South (Postma, 2020).

As highlighted in many critical autoethnographic works and narratives (Chasi, 2019; Frizelle, 2019; Jawitz, 2019; Kiguwa, 2019; Nathane, 2019; Phaswana; 2019) racial identity and all that it involves is very much present in academics' interpretations of their lived experience in teaching and learning spaces. Academia, according to Thielsch (2020), is not without bias, but created, lived, and reproduced by individuals, who themselves have been socialised within specific knowledge production modes, and embedded with ideals and standards, which are transmitted through academic practices. Various factors such as national policy demands, institutional settings and personal intellectual and educational histories inform the curriculum choices that academics make (Sayed et al., 2019). Du Plessis (2021) raises an essential question: Are lecturers prepared to embrace change? Are they ready to decolonise their perspectives and develop new approaches to teaching about Africa, its continent, and the necessary curriculum for students?

2.15 Rethinking Curriculum and Pedagogy

According to Jansen (2017), the reason why curriculum repeatedly appears as a rallying point in protests led by student movements is that it holds a symbolic value which exceeds its fundamental instrumental use in choosing module content, pedagogy, and learning processes. It embodies a set of ideals, values, and commitments, serving as the most tangible evidence of a selective tradition. Those in positions of power intentionally

choose what they deem valuable to know and teach, ultimately determining what is included in curricula and what is omitted (Jansen, 2017).

Ubuntu-Currere (Le Grange, 2016; Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2019; Hlatshwayo, 2023) or a curriculum based on Ubuntu principles, can serve as an essential instrument in the transformation and decolonisation of the South African higher education curriculum and teaching methods. This involves a dedication to engaging dynamically with the world by developing and implementing a curriculum that addresses the current challenges and realities of the Global South. Such a curriculum should also incorporate the voices and contributions of students. Consequently, Ubuntu Currere fosters research that prioritises the global South and encourages ontological and epistemic diversity, embracing various ways of being, thinking, perceiving, and interpreting both the literature and the world (Hlatshwayo, 2023). At its core, Ubuntu prioritises harmony and collaboration between individuals and their surroundings (Zwane, 2019). This way of life represents humanity, personhood, morality and what it means to be human (Zwane, 2019).

2.16 The Importance of New Curricula and Pedagogies in South Africa

The purpose of higher education in South Africa should reflect a curriculum and pedagogy that actively responds to the differentiated and fragmented context of South Africa, democratic and demographic differences, and cosmopolitan worldviews which represent diverse knowledge systems and production thereof, decolonisation and social transformation (Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2019). Ultimately students and academics should have the power to control what should be part of the curriculum and how it should be taught (Hoadley & Galant, 2019) As Hungwe and Ndofirepi (2022) state, decolonisation as an ongoing process, should promote a fair epistemic interaction between Africa and its knowledge systems and the knowledge systems of the rest of the world. Woldegiorgis (2021) suggests repositioning higher education by transitioning from a singular to a diverse perspective. This shift involves a fundamental change in mindset, recognising, recording, and embedding indigenous knowledge systems, integrating them into higher education curricula, and broadening the structures for generating knowledge. A decolonised curriculum

must overcome restrictive and biased identities and facilitate the creation of an identity within the higher education institutions that embraces equality, allows for a new type of relational reflexivity and encourages inclusivity (Shaik & Kahn, 2021).

Lang (2019) proposes a curriculum and pedagogy of presence. This would represent an acknowledgement of students and their bodies, their selves, their lived experiences, and their identities. This would also require the affirmation of the position and identity of those who teach. For universities to play an important role in social transformation, all university inhabitants and stakeholders need to recentre themselves and thereby create the possibility of the creation and growth of new forms of learning, new intersubjective relationships, and new respect for different modes of knowing (Lang, 2019). This relates to the *pedagogy of mattering* (p.389) which Gravett et al. (2021) mentioned. The authors defined pedagogies of mattering as an approach that incorporates relational pedagogies in higher education, extending beyond human-centred considerations. Pedagogies of mattering build upon the ideas that highlight lived experiences, indeterminacy, and disequilibrium. The aim is to view higher education as an interconnected practice shaped by intertwined histories. When rethinking curriculum implementation, attention should be given to the everyday learning materials and resources: the suggested texts, teaching aids, reading lists, and required materials. There is a need to examine how these elements might reinforce or marginalise certain groups and normalise which voices are considered important (Gravett et al., 2021).

2.17 Two Pedagogical Invitations to Create a Decolonised Curriculum

To reimagine higher education Stein et al. (2021) propose two pedagogical invitations. The first invitation accentuates the importance of the need to sit with and learn from. This invitation focuses on learning about the harmful social relations, institutions, and subjectivities that have caused the current status quo as well as placing emphasis on unlearning any habits, beliefs or attitudes that may be contributing to these harmful social relations, institutions and subjectivities. The second invitation focuses on cultivating ecological, social and historical accountability while also allowing for pluralistic propositional thinking. In other words, it promotes an approach that does not seek universal facts or reality

but rather acknowledges that all knowledge has contextual relevance and internal integrity (Stein et al., 2021). As Held (2019) argues, progress relies on valuing the life histories of othered peoples as well as individuals who partake in the othering. In other words, knowledge should be created about, for, as well as from othered peoples.

Le Grange (2016) asserts that a decolonised curriculum must be built on principles of reciprocal appropriation, relational accountability, rights and regulations, and respectful representation. Relational accountability implies that every aspect of the curriculum should be interconnected and answerable to both human and non-human entities. Respectful representation emphasises the need for the curriculum to recognise and create space for indigenous voices. Reciprocal appropriation ensures that the knowledge generated benefits both universities and the surrounding communities. Lastly, rights and regulations pertain to the ethical application of practices that ensure the rightful ownership of knowledge is attributed to indigenous peoples when applicable (Le Grange, 2016).

2.18 Critical Reflexivity to Decolonise Higher Education

Critical reflexivity should be used as a tool to implement decolonisation in higher education. It can inspire students to question the settings in which they are entrenched and promote transformative learning (Castell et al., 2018). In the author's article, Moosavi (2022) introduced the concept of "decolonial reflexivity" (p.138) as a methodological tool informed by theory for critically evaluating one's endeavours in academic decolonisation. Engaging in decolonial reflexivity is essential because, without introspective analysis of decolonisation efforts, the project may fail to progress as needed or unintentionally perpetuate the very systems it is meant to dismantle (Moosavi, 2022). The persistent influence of colonialism in higher education is fuelled by the lack of self-awareness among administrators, academics, and lecturers regarding their own epistemological viewpoints. This creates a monologue rather than a liberating dialogue (Freire, 2014), resulting in what Hayes et al. (2021) refer to as inertia, co-option, and essentialism. This inertia, co-option, and essentialism align with the concept of "inertial momentum" (Mason, 2009, p.119), which, from a complexity theory perspective, defines power as a dominant force that sustains and amplifies its momentum, much like a

snowball effect. It absorbs minor influences while marginalising weaker forces, making significant change possible only when an alternative force builds enough momentum to alter the existing trajectory. This principle of path dependence explains how dominant structures, including educational institutions, maintain their influence, while weaker ones risk continuous decline unless a competing force intervenes to disrupt the cycle (Mason, 2009).

Decolonising the university or classroom requires self-examination and rejecting the misleading idea of objectivity, political neutrality, and the belief that all perspectives equally affect marginalised groups. Learning about decolonisation involves understanding that the role of academics is to help students recognise that their challenges arise from identifiable systems and cultures of inequality, as well as to equip them with strategies to resist and subvert these systems (Du Plessis, 2021).

2.19 A Pluralistic Approach to a Decentralised Curriculum

For higher education to be really decolonised, and thereby democratic, it must not have a neutral ideological approach. It should actively strive to equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to become active and engaged inhabitants of a democratic South Africa. The university curriculum and pedagogy should be driven by an interest in educational justice, freedom advocacy, democratic engagement, autonomy, and responsiveness to the previously disadvantaged other (Lumadi, 2021). A reimagined decolonised curriculum must immerse itself critically with what decentring (p.207) and recentring (Sayed et al., 2019) signifies and must allow for and supply different views on topics, initiate debates on current and relevant issues, and ultimately encourage critical thinking (Lumadi, 2021). The curriculum should allow room for dangerous conversations (Sayed et al., 2019) about sensitive topics such as race, body, and positionality. As Jansen (2017) points out, the curriculum transformation process is messy, uneven and uncertain in how it will play out. To believe that human beings can instantaneously transform an unwanted curriculum to put forth new ideals exists in the realm of science fiction and not in the world of serious higher education (Jansen, 2017).

Long (2018) has advocated for using some form of the Golden Rule which suggests treating others according to how you want to be treated. This requires creating a curriculum that would allow for and promote the appreciation of one's own mind, as well as the minds of others. For the decolonisation of social sciences, this would mean adopting a boundary-less approach when studying human nature (Oppong, 2019).

2.20 Conclusion

This chapter focused on developing a greater understanding of decolonisation, what challenges decolonisation faces, the decolonisation of South African higher education, the role of academics and what a decolonised curriculum and pedagogy could look like.

Decolonisation seeks to counteract the effects of colonisation and promote justice, but in South African higher education, it faces issues such as entrenched systems, resistance, and ongoing racial and neo-colonial practices, necessitating a continuous, holistic approach that integrates local and global perspectives and emphasises the role of academics in driving transformative change. The following chapter introduces the theoretical framework chosen for this study. This chapter will explore the interpretivist paradigm, linking it to various aspects and key study concepts. It also examines the history of the interpretivist paradigm and its use in higher education and social science research.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the interpretivist paradigm by examining its ontology, axiology, epistemology, and methodology. It then provides a brief history of the interpretivist paradigm, highlighting its origins and main contributors. The chapter also investigates the core assumptions and principles of the paradigm. Additionally, it explores the application of the interpretivist paradigm within the social sciences and its interaction with systematic literature reviews. Lastly, the chapter discusses the advantages and drawbacks of a theoretical framework based on the interpretivist paradigm.

In this chapter on the theoretical framework, it is important to distinguish between paradigms and theories, as they serve different but interconnected roles in scholarly inquiry. A paradigm represents a broad conceptual framework or worldview that influences how knowledge is constructed, guiding the types of questions researchers ask and the methodologies they employ. Within a given paradigm, a theory provides a specific, evidence-based explanation of a phenomenon, offering testable hypotheses that can evolve as new insights emerge. While paradigms shape the development and interpretation of theories, theories function as structured explanations within a particular paradigm, illustrating their distinct yet complementary roles in academic research (Gichuru, 2017; Günbayi & Sorm, 2018; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). **3.2 The Interpretivist Paradigm: Ontology, Axiology, Epistemology, and Methodology**

Interpretive approaches prioritise two key aspects: the interpretations that individuals give to their experiences and the understandings they derive from them. These approaches examine how individuals understand and interpret their experiences, and how their subjective experiences and understandings intersect and coalesce to form collective perspectives (Putnam & Banghart, 2017). This makes the interpretivist paradigm a suitable theoretical framework for understanding the lived experiences of social science academics in higher education as it emphasises subjective meaning-making, contextual understanding,

and the significance of social interactions, aligning with qualitative methods and the goals of exploring complex phenomena like decolonisation.

The interpretivist paradigm was created as a response to the over-dominance of positivism (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016, p.55) and due to the perceived limitations of the positivist and post-positivist paradigms (Pham, 2018). The rise of *Verstehen* (p.29) signalled a reaction against positivism which was prevalent among 19th century philosophers and early social scientists (Fay, 2017). Also referred to as the *constructivist paradigm* (Al-Riyami, 2015, p. 413; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 33) or *social constructivism* (Rahi, 2017, p. 1) by various authors, as reality is constructed (Hiller, 2016) socially by multiple individuals (Baynes, 2017) through the lived experiences of social narrators (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022) or social actors (Irshaidat, 2022) and there is no single (Ryan, 2018) all-embracing (Pulla & Carter, 2018) truth or reality which can be observed and measured quantitatively (Gichuru, 2017). Knowledge is subjective, intersubjective and cannot be generalised to the masses (Hiller, 2016). Meaning developed by research is interconnected with participants and the research context (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019) and knowledge is acquired through deep interpretation of both (Rahi, 2017, p.1).

The interpretivist paradigm embraces a subjective epistemology, a balanced axiology, a relativist ontology, and a naturalistic methodology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This paradigm borrows from a *relativist ontology* (Ryan, 2018, p.9) which means it holds the belief that a single occurrence can have numerous different meanings (Al-Riyami, 2015) and can be determined by multiple methods (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Pham, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm is “*anti-foundationalist*” (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016, p.55) as it rejects the existence of detached entities and fixed facts (Irshaidat, 2022). From an epistemological perspective, the interpretivist paradigm holds that knowledge is accumulated (Al-Riyami, 2015) and meaning is complex (Irshaidat, 2022). Varying versions of interpretivism are based on hermeneutics, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism. Axiologically, interpretivism acknowledges the value-laden nature of research (Al-Riyami & Pius, 2020). The researcher

is responsible for providing well-articulated and detailed representations and explanations of everything during the research process and results (Hiller, 2016).

In discussing ontology, epistemology, paradigm, and methodology, it is essential for the researcher to reflect on their positionality and reflexivity. As a young white woman with a public university educational background and her own experiences as a part-time lecturer at a tertiary education institution, the researcher acknowledges how her gender, race, educational background, age, and opinions influenced her understanding of the lived experiences of academics. Strategies such as maintaining a reflexive journal and seeking feedback from peers helped the researcher address these biases throughout the research process.

By prioritising the lived experiences of participants, the researcher aimed to uncover the complexities of their narratives. However, they recognised that their perspective due to personal beliefs about and experiences of higher education may introduce biases, influencing how they interpreted and analysed the data. To mitigate this, the researcher engaged in reflexivity by actively questioning their assumptions and considering alternative viewpoints throughout the research process. This approach not only enhanced the credibility of the findings but also acknowledged the multiplicity of truths that exist within the context of higher education transformation. Ultimately, while the researcher's positionality shaped their methodological choices, their commitment to reflexivity ensured a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of the intersection between student experiences and institutional structures.

3.3 Brief History of the Interpretivist Paradigm

Several prominent theorists have played a key role in advancing the development of the interpretivist paradigm. One key concept is *Verstehen* (Baynes, 2017, p. 77; Fay, 2017, p. 29), a German term meaning "to understand," which holds significant importance in the philosophy of social science. It involves interpreting the significance of behaviours, relationships, psychological processes, and cultural aspects like customs or art from the viewpoint of those who produce and interact with them. The term was first introduced in this

context by 19th century German historian Johann Droysen, who used it to distinguish between the natural sciences, which aim to explain natural phenomena, and the social sciences, which focus on understanding the meanings behind the phenomena they study (Baynes, 2017; Fay, 2017).

The interpretive approach in social sciences has its roots in German ideology, particularly Immanuel Kant's idea that the mind shapes our understanding of the world. This approach emphasises subjective experiences and meanings, rather than concrete facts. It developed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, influenced by the works of Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, Edmund Husserl, and Alfred Schutz, who developed the concept of *verstehen* (understanding subjective meanings) and phenomenology (exploring consciousness and intentionality) (Pulla & Carter, 2018; Putnam & Banghart, 2017). The theorists recognised that social reality exists in the realm of ideas and spirit, not just concrete facts. The approach focuses on how individuals attribute meaning to cultural experiences and share beliefs and norms through language, leading to the concept of intersubjectivity (shared meanings and knowledge). By prioritising understanding subjective experiences and meanings, the interpretive approach offers a nuanced perspective on social reality, highlighting the intricate and ever-changing nature of human interactions and cultural experiences (Putnam & Banghart, 2017).

Max Weber, a foundational figure in interpretivism, worked with the concept of *Verstehen* (Fay, 2017), stressing the need to understand social actions' meanings and contexts from the individuals' viewpoints. Wilhelm Dilthey, a German philosopher, later brought prominence to the concept of *Verstehen* in the late 19th century, providing a detailed account of the philosophy of social sciences (Fay, 2017). Dilthey distinguished between natural and human sciences, advocating for the latter to focus on understanding human experiences and meanings through empathy (Baynes, 2017).

Peter Winch's influential text, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (Winch 1958, as cited in Winch, 2016), defended interpretivism in the English-speaking world by integrating Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy into social sciences.

Influenced by R. G. Collingwood, Weber, and the German tradition of *Verstehen*, Winch challenged the prevailing positivist view that the natural and social sciences share the same goals and methods. Winch argued that social sciences should aim to understand the meaning of institutions and practices from the participants' perspectives. Winch emphasised that interpreting social actions requires reconstructing the rules of the form of life under study, a process that involves immersing oneself in the participants' practices. (Baynes, 2017; Winch, 2016). This approach, which Anthony Giddens later termed the *double hermeneutic* (p.78), positions social inquiry closer to philosophical investigation than empirical science (Baynes, 2017).

Alfred Schutz extended Weber's ideas, and emphasised how individuals construct social reality through everyday interactions and the importance of understanding these subjective experiences (Blell et al., 2022). Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) contributed to hermeneutics, arguing that understanding is a dialogical process shaped by historical and cultural contexts. Lastly, Clifford Geertz, a cultural anthropologist, championed an interpretive approach to culture through thick description, providing detailed, contextualised accounts of cultural practices to understand their meanings from participants' perspectives (Baynes, 2017).

3.4 The Main Assumptions and Principles of the Paradigm

The interpretivism approach variates from the natural sciences (Baynes, 2017) as it views human beings as being different from natural events, and human beings cannot be examined in the same way as natural phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020) as human social actions are inherently more meaningful (Hiller, 2016). The positivist perspective focuses on explaining cause and effect, while the interpretivist approach is more focused on understanding knowledge (Hiller, 2016).

The principles of the interpretivist paradigm encompass the hermeneutic circle, contextualisation, interaction between researchers and subjects, abstraction and generalisation, dialogical reasoning, multiple interpretations, and suspicion, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of human phenomena in qualitative research

(Gichuru, 2017). Interpretivism has its foundations in both symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. These philosophical roots posit that objective, value-free, and theory-neutral facts do not exist. Instead, the nature of objects and phenomena is shaped by the meanings and interpretations that individuals assign to them. In other words, the way people perceive and understand objects determines their essence, highlighting the subjective and constructive nature of reality (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022).

The primary goal of the interpretivist paradigm is to gain an understanding of the subjective aspects of human experiences (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) and how individuals create, modify, and understand their social realities (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Using this approach helps researchers get into the head of the humans whom they are studying (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The interpretive paradigm places greater emphasis on nuanced variables and contextual factors, viewing humans as distinct from physical phenomena. It suggests that human understanding delves deeper into meanings, operating under the assumption that exploring humans cannot follow the same methodologies used for examining physical phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Pham, 2018). It argues that knowledge and truth are subjective, historically, and culturally located, and grounded in personal experiences and the way an individual interprets these experiences (Ryan, 2018). The researcher focuses on the whole experience (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, p.42) and encourages absolute dismissal of static reality (Irshaidat, 2022, p.142), or in other words, reality is not permanent (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021).

Social learning is viewed as a means of spreading embedded norms, which become intrinsic and inseparable from the fabric of society (Irshaidat, 2022). This perspective acknowledges that the same reality can be interpreted in multiple ways (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022), rejecting the notion of uniformity. Therefore, interpreting phenomena within this framework involves discarding established terms and universal jargon. Instead, it relies on understanding cultures, texts, theories, concepts, and behaviours to grasp human decisions (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). From an epistemological perspective, knowledge is considered complex, subjective, and influenced by individual experiences. Gaining knowledge is

challenging due to the diverse interpretations within a culture and the continuous shifts in these interpretations, driven by the dynamic nature of social reality (Irshaidat, 2022).

The research is structured in a way that attempts to understand what has happened as well as the how and why (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The paradigm holds the idealistic position and combines phenomenology, hermeneutics, and social constructivism (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

3.5 The Interpretivist Paradigm and Research in the Social Sciences

The interpretivist researcher uses a naturalistic approach to methodology (Al-Riyami, 2015). Interpretivism considers circumstantial and cultural differences when it comes to the creation of various social realities (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Gichuru, 2017). The interpretivist researcher maintains reliability and validity through triangulation and comparison of results and findings (Irshaidat, 2022).

Research findings are seen as value-laden, and these values must be explicitly acknowledged. Additionally, contextual factors are deemed crucial in the systematic pursuit of understanding (Kivuna & Kuyini, 2017). Or, in other words, a distinguishing characteristic of this paradigm is that it attempts to generate contextually situated understandings (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019) rather than aiming to determine exact universal laws (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Kivuna & Kuyini, 2017) while using and integrating the subjective experiences of participants (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The researcher considers the individual in a holistic way, considering the context of their experiences (Pulla & Carter, 2018). Researchers using the interpretivist approach do not start with a specific theory but aim to create meaning throughout the research process (Al-Riyami, 2015).

Social reality is created by the experiences of individuals and social backgrounds, therefore making it a suitable choice when attempting to understand human behaviours in cultural and social settings (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The world is viewed as an emergent social process created by individuals, characterised by cohesion and order. To uncover social reality, it is necessary to delve into human consciousness and subjectivity to find the underlying meanings of social life. Human experiences and social phenomena are context-

bound and influenced by time, location, and the perspectives of participants, making complete objectivity and neutrality unattainable. Thus, this paradigm is well-suited for qualitative research design (Günbayi, & Sorm, 2018).

Using the interpretivist paradigm as a theoretical lens is well-suited for the study as it enables the researcher to gather insights from the experiences and viewpoints of the participants (Thanh & Thanh, 2015) and examine human behaviours in the context of socio-cultural issues (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022) such as the decolonisation of higher education. These experiences will allow the researcher to create their understanding (Thanh & Thanh, 2015) of the experience of being an academic in higher education during the era of decolonisation.

3.6 The Interpretivist Paradigm and Systematic Literature Reviews

A qualitative systematic review is supported by the interpretivist paradigm. Systematic review researchers believe that each primary qualitative report reflects the researchers' interpretation of the study participants' interpretations of the phenomenon. This method allows for the diverse opinions of different stakeholders to be revealed with a nuanced understanding. Researchers seek evidence that contests, reinforces, and augments their emerging understanding of phenomena (Günbayi, & Sorm, 2018). The qualitative systematic review aims to offer a detailed insight into the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Butler et al., 2016), which relates to the principles of the interpretivist paradigm.

Theoretical perspectives are an important aspect to consider when choosing to use a qualitative systematic review. As a deeper interpretation of qualitative data is needed, the interpretivist paradigm is a good fit for this methodology (McMahon et al., 2022). Qualitative systematic reviews stand out from other forms of research synthesis due to how they frame their research questions, their thorough search methods, their rigorous appraisal criteria, and their transparent guidelines for selecting which studies to include or exclude.

3.7 The Benefits and Limitations of the Interpretivist Paradigm

According to Pervin and Mokhtar (2022), a benefit of the interpretivist paradigm is that it allows for diverse perspectives and understandings, which according to Pham (2018), allows for a deeper comprehension of humans, material objects, and events, as well as the

socio-cultural contexts in which it all exists. Another benefit of using the interpretivism approach to research is that allows for a wide variety of research methods and methodology, including ethnographies, grounded theory, life histories, and case studies (Pham, 2018)

Some authors argue that the interpretivist paradigm does not include scientific verification thus making results invalid and useless (Al-Riyami, 2015; Pham, 2018) and thereby does not make a significant contribution to social analysis (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). According to Rehman and Alharthi (2016), some criticise the interpretivist paradigm for being soft as theories created through this paradigm cannot be generalised to larger populations. Another potential limitation of this approach is that the outcomes can be shaped by the researcher's emotions, interpretations, personal biases, and belief systems, which may compromise objectivity (Al-Riyami, 2015; Junjie & Yingxin, 2022; Pham, 2018).

According to Al-Riyami (2015), the most significant drawback is that the paradigm does not address the ideological and political influences on society and knowledge. The interpretivist paradigm focuses on gaining an understanding of current phenomena rather than focusing on social or political issues (Pham, 2018). According to Al-Riyami (2015), an interpretivist researcher may become frustrated by not being able to limit the scope of their research and being unable to see the relationship between the research questions and research results. As stated by Pervin and Mokhtar (2022), due to the interpretivist paradigm's emphasis on understanding subjective meanings, the complexity of social phenomena, as well as the dynamic nature of context, it can be challenging for researchers to define a narrow scope and establish clear connections between research questions and findings.

While the interpretivist paradigm primarily focuses on understanding lived experiences rather than directly addressing political or ideological influences (Al-Riyami, 2015; Pham, 2018), this study acknowledges the significance of power dynamics, inequality, and social change within the broader discourse of decolonisation in higher education. By critically engaging with participants' narratives, the study explores how dominant structures shape their experiences, thereby indirectly revealing the political and ideological underpinnings of knowledge production and institutional transformation.

Although the critical paradigm explicitly seeks to challenge power structures and advocate for change, this study employs an interpretivist approach to prioritise participants' subjective and contextual understandings of decolonisation. This choice aligns with the study's objective of examining how individuals experience and make sense of decolonisation rather than imposing predefined critiques or solutions. However, while this study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, it remains informed by critical perspectives, particularly in its analysis of how social power dynamics and institutional barriers influence participants' experiences. Future research could build on this work by incorporating a dual-paradigm approach, integrating both interpretivist and critical perspectives to provide a more explicit analysis of structural inequalities and their impact on higher education transformation.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the interpretivist paradigm, with its relativist ontology, subjective epistemology, naturalist methodology, and balanced axiology. Emerging in response to positivism, it acknowledges the socially constructed nature of reality, where knowledge is intersubjective and deeply interconnected with the research context. Contributions from key theorists like Johann Droysen, Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Peter Winch, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and Clifford Geertz have underscored concepts like Verstehen, intersubjectivity, and the social construction of reality through language and cultural practices. The paradigm assumes that human beings are distinct from natural events, focusing on understanding subjective experiences and social realities through principles such as the hermeneutic circle, contextualisation, and multiple interpretations. The next chapter focuses on the methodology used in the study. It describes the research design, research setting, scope of the study, study sample, data collection method, search procedures and strategies, data extraction method, data analysis, data synthesis, quality assurance and trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research design, study setting, scope, sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis and synthesis processes, and the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. It also discusses the limitations associated with the chosen methodology. Various approaches are available for conducting systematic reviews of qualitative research, and the selected methodology offers a structured framework to guide the literature search, selection of primary studies, evaluation, and synthesis of the findings.

4.2 Research Design

Qualitative inquiry is a comprehensive approach used by researchers to examine and understand social contexts and phenomena. This type of research is grounded in the belief that individuals use their perceptions—what they see, hear, and feel—to interpret social experiences (Liamputtong, 2019). Research necessitates integrating and coordinating various components such as data collection methods, analysis techniques, and theoretical frameworks. This integration ensures that the research is comprehensive and coherent, allowing researchers to capture the complexity of social phenomena. Qualitative research can be characterised as naturalistic, emergent, and multidimensional, and a complex yet well-coordinated combination of numerous elements.

In qualitative research, the concepts of being naturalistic, emergent, and multidimensional represent the diverse methodological and epistemological approaches used to explore human experiences and social phenomena. Naturalistic research emphasises real-world settings and contextual understanding, employing fieldwork and unstructured data collection methods like open-ended interviews to capture participants' lived experiences. Emergent research allows flexibility in design, enabling researchers to adapt their methods and questions based on ongoing insights and to involve participants in co-creating knowledge through iterative processes. Multidimensionality acknowledges the

complexity of social phenomena by incorporating multiple data sources, diverse participant perspectives, and various theoretical frameworks. Effective coordination of these elements requires designing a flexible research framework, integrating data from different methods, and maintaining reflexivity to ensure credibility and integrity in findings. By managing these components, qualitative researchers can generate an in-depth and detailed understanding of the complexities of social realities. In essence, qualitative methods are inherently interpretive, capturing the intricate nuances of human experiences (Billups, 2021; Cheong et al., 2023; Salmons, 2022).

Qualitative research, as described by Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), focuses on uncovering meaning and providing a phenomenological understanding based on experiences, which quantitative research cannot achieve. Qualitative research encompasses various designs, each tailored to examine the intricate nature of human experiences and social phenomena. These various designs include, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnographies, case studies, narrative research, content analysis, focus groups and qualitative systematic reviews (Willig, 2021). Qualitative systematic reviews differ from quantitative systematic reviews in that they aim to offer a deep understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions, rather than assessing the impact of an intervention (Butler et al., 2016).

A qualitative systematic review, as used in this study, integrates findings from multiple primary qualitative studies, offering deeper insights into social phenomena (Tong et al., 2016). This approach involves predefined, explicit, and structured methods with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria (MacMillan et al., 2019). Such reviews systematically synthesise previous research (McMahon et al., 2022), critically assessing qualitative data (Chapman, 2021; Snyder, 2019) to enhance evidence dissemination and understanding (MacMillan et al., 2019). They are designed to address specific research questions, providing insights that extend beyond individual studies (Lame, 2019), while improving transparency and minimising bias through systematic methods (Snyder, 2019). Ultimately,

qualitative systematic reviews guide policymakers and practitioners by offering comprehensive understanding (Linnenluecke, 2020).

Flemming and Noyes (2021) describe qualitative evidence synthesis (QES) as a type of qualitative systematic review that integrates the findings and results from primary qualitative studies. This type of systematic review aims to create a deep understanding and rich interpretations of groups and individuals' views, beliefs, and experiences. By using QES, new cumulative knowledge is developed through the synthesis of evidence from qualitative research projects. The aim is not to provide a mere summary of a combination of studies, but to enable the researcher to go beyond (Flemming & Noyes, 2021) and produce something more valuable. QES can assist in exploring research questions that attempt to improve comprehension of a specific phenomenon of interest such as the understanding of the lived experiences of individuals (Flemming et al., 2019; Flemming & Noyes, 2021), thereby making it a relevant method when attempting to explore the lived experiences of academics with decolonisation in higher education.

4.3 Research Setting

Internet-based research refers to studies where data is gathered from online sources (Cilliers & Viljoen, 2020). The Internet has transformed how academia accesses information for teaching and research (Cilliers & Viljoen, 2020). The Internet provides a diverse and versatile field site for qualitative research. Salmons (2017) categorises online data into elicited, extant, and enacted types, each involving different levels of participant interaction. Extant data encompasses documents, visuals, records, academic journals, and other materials that researchers analyse to gather evidence and background information pertinent to the research problem (Salmons, 2017). This means this research focused on studies using existing materials that were developed independently of the researcher's influence. While online research is convenient, it raises ethical concerns regarding data access, participant privacy, and the researcher-participant relationship. Researchers must follow best practices and ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, safeguarding data, and respecting participant identities (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

4.4 Sample

Since this study is a qualitative review, the emphasis was placed on identifying studies that offer new conceptions of the phenomenon under investigation, rather than compiling multiple instances of the same finding. According to Booth (2016), qualitative data collection focuses on systematic, non-probabilistic sampling, as opposed to aiming for statistical representativeness. The goal of qualitative evidence synthesis (QES) is to pinpoint studies that are relevant to the phenomenon being studied, rather than achieving statistical representativeness. Methods from primary qualitative research, such as seeking studies that present negative cases, ensuring maximum variability, and designing diverse result sets, serve as alternatives to the homogeneity sought in statistical meta-analyses (Booth, 2016).

Criterion-based sampling involves selecting cases that provide rich information to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Unlike random sampling in quantitative research, which focuses on generalisability, qualitative research concentrates on gaining a deep understanding of specific experiences, perspectives, or phenomena, or the specific combination of individuals and contextual factors within a particular setting. Criterion-based selection shapes the focus and direction of the research, aligning with the study's purpose, available resources, research questions, and challenges faced. In this study, criterion-based sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) was employed, where sources were selected based on a specific set of pre-established criteria (Salmons, 2022). The strength of criterion-based sampling lies in its ability to identify and select information-rich cases for detailed investigation, such as particular individuals, events, or settings that provide valuable insights into the research topic.

The primary focus in qualitative research is on flexibility and depth rather than quantity, aiming to understand the meanings or processes individuals attribute to their social situations. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative studies typically involve a smaller sample size, prioritising quality over generalisation. Sample size in qualitative research is determined by data saturation rather than a fixed number. Saturation occurs when no new data or patterns emerge during data collection (Liamputtong, 2019). In this study, a criterion-

based sampling strategy was employed, focusing on pre-determined criteria discussed later in this section. This approach aimed to ensure a sufficiently diverse sample to capture varied perspectives and allow for data saturation. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher monitored for saturation by reviewing transcripts for recurring themes, maintaining an annotated bibliography that included article titles, authors, and key findings, and keeping a reflexive journal to document thoughts, biases, and evolving understandings of the topic. This monitoring indicated that no new insights were being generated.

Interpretive approaches, like the one used in this study, typically focus on a smaller number of studies. While specifying an exact number is not ideal, the amount of relevant data is influenced by both the number of studies and their contextual richness and conceptual depth (Booth, 2016). Booth states that the preferred number is between six and 14 studies. In conducting this study, a thorough literature review was essential to inform the analysis and understanding of the complex issues surrounding the lived experiences of academics with the decolonisation of higher education. While the commonly recommended number of articles for in-depth qualitative analysis ranges from six to 14, the researcher included a broader range of articles to enhance the comprehensiveness of the review and decided to review 33 articles. This broader selection was necessary to identify key themes, trends, and gaps in the existing literature, ultimately allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

While it is acknowledged that smaller samples are typically favoured for depth of analysis, this comprehensive review was instrumental in grounding the study in a solid understanding of the literature. Incorporating methodological Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (QES) literature (Noyes et al., 2019) further strengthens this foundation by providing structured approaches to synthesising qualitative research, ensuring transparency and rigour in the review process. By taking this approach, the research benefits from enhanced rigour and a more thorough exploration of the complexities inherent in the lived experiences of academics with the decolonisation of higher education; while also ensuring that the final selection was

not only manageable but also representative in a field where the nuances of various perspectives play a significant role in shaping the analysis.

The inclusion criteria used for this study included topic, methods, sources, language (Lame, 2018), population studied (Chapman, 2021), and full-text availability (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). The goal of the review was to analyse articles published in English in peer-reviewed journals and textbooks within an eight-year timeframe, i.e., 2016-2024. This period was chosen due to the publication boom on the topic following the 2015 and 2016 student protests in South Africa (Chikoko, 2021). Exclusion criteria included publication date, methodology used, and where the population studied is situated (Chapman, 2021). The exclusion criteria for this review encompass several key parameters: quantitative studies were excluded unless they contained a significant qualitative component, as the focus is primarily on qualitative insights. Additionally, any studies not directly related to higher education or social science academics were disregarded, along with non-peer-reviewed sources and grey literature. Research centred on disciplines outside the social sciences was also excluded unless they provided comparative insights relevant to social science fields. Furthermore, studies that did not specifically address the South African context or that solely focused on student experiences, rather than the lived experiences of academics and the theme of decolonisation, were not included in this review.

4.5 Data Collection Method

The stages of this systematic review consist of the following: initial screening, full-text review, quality assessment, data extraction, data synthesis, interpretation and reporting, updating and re-evaluation. These stages are discussed in the sections that follow. Table 1 illustrates the Patient/Population, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome (PICO) Protocol adapted for this study.

Table 1

Adapted PICO Protocol as used in this study

| |
|--|
| PCO – Population, Context, Outcome (Modified PICO) (Butler et al., 2016) |
| P - social science academics |
| C - decolonisation in higher education |
| O- Lived experiences |
| Research Question: What is the understanding and experience of social science academics regarding the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy in higher education in South Africa as represented in existing published literature? |
| The aim of the review: This study explores the literature's perspective on the understanding and experiences of social science academics regarding the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy in higher education in South Africa. The objectives of this study are to examine how social science academics define, interpret, and navigate decolonisation within their disciplines and institutions; to analyse the influence of identity, power dynamics, and institutional structures on academics' engagement with decolonial work; and to identify the key challenges and barriers that social science academics, particularly early-career scholars, face in advancing decolonisation in higher education. |

4.5.1 Search Procedures and Strategies

As suggested by Chapman (2021), when it came to searching, precision was sacrificed for comprehensiveness. The search strategy included the keywords: decolonisation, higher education, academics' perspectives, social sciences, qualitative systematic literature review; and the combination thereof, the inclusion of books, and book chapters (Linnenluecke, 2020; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). The selection and enrichment of the selected keywords were done by using related terms, synonyms, and keyword variations when searching databases for suitable articles (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020).

This study employed two search methods: advanced searching and manual searching (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). Manual searching involved techniques such as handpicking, backward and forward citation tracking, and reference tracking (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). Search databases included EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Sage (Chapman, 2021; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020).

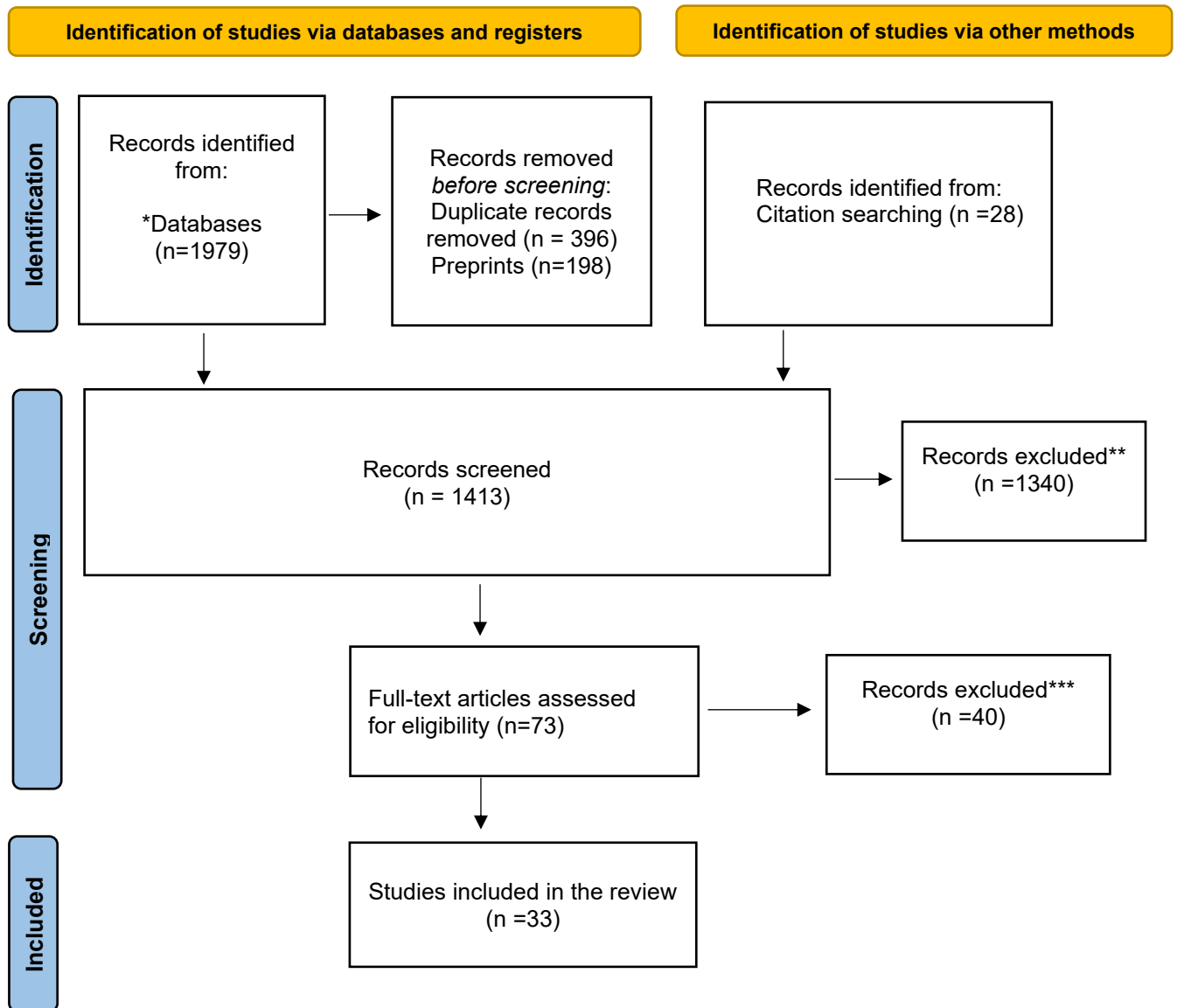
Systematic approaches to searching can be characterised by seven distinct features (Booth, 2016). The *7 S approach* (Booth, 2016, p.19; Flemming & Noyes, 2021, p. 3) was used as a guide in searching for literature and determining which literature to include. These seven sections were employed to address various aspects related to the sampling of papers, structured questions, sources, search procedures, methodological filters, search strategies, supplementary techniques, and criteria for searching reports (Booth, 2016; Flemming et al., 2019; Flemming & Noyes, 2021).

Researchers are required to provide a rationale for their sampling strategy, ensure it aligns with their synthesis method, and offer a comprehensive description of how it was implemented (Booth et al., 2021). At least sources relevant to both the topic and the specific setting were considered (Booth et al., 2021), including journal articles, conference abstracts, proceedings (Li et al., 2019), books, and book chapters (Booth, 2016). The design of the questions should align with the objectives and scope of the review; when combined with an intervention review, the qualitative question may align closely or explore broader aspects of interest (Booth et al., 2021). Given the limited results from qualitative topic-based searches, reviewers should focus on specificity to obtain relevant materials and develop additional search strategies to address indexing deficiencies (Booth et al., 2021). Filters should align with the review's intended purpose, and supplementary strategies such as reference checking, examining tables of contents, citation searches, or contacting authors and experts can be effective, especially for broad topics or those with significant terminological variations (Booth et al., 2021). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA

2020) was followed as the standard for reporting search strategies. Figure 2 illustrates how this diagram was applied to this study.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram as Applied in this Study



*Databases: Scopus = 595; EBSCOhost = 110; ERIC = 244; ProQuest = 800; Scielo = 8; Web of Science = 88; Wiley Online Library = 134

**Reasons for exclusion: quantitative or mixed methods methodology (n =202); non-academic populations: (n =133); irrelevant topic (n = 673); non-social science focus (n=135); geographical scope (n=135); language: (n=67)

***Reasons for exclusion: methodology, findings, wrong setting or context, irrelevance of the research question, no significant contribution

4.5.2 Data Extraction

The data extraction method for this study was influenced by the purpose of the review as well as the integrated synthesis method that was used. The nature and type of data and evidence was determined by the research question (Flemming et al., 2019; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). According to McMahon et al. (2022), determining what qualifies as data within qualitative systematic reviews poses a challenge. The review focused on examining four types of information, namely demographic information, theoretical information, contextual information, and perceptual information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

To extract data in QES, a two-stage process is needed. Firstly, contextual details are extracted. This includes the setting of the study, the population used and their characteristics, recruitment methods, methodology, data collection, and data analysis (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). Secondly, the findings are extracted from the primary qualitative studies. This includes researcher observations, participant quotes, author interpretations, new theory, or themes and sub-themes identified by the researcher (Flemming & Noyes, 2021).

For this study, data consisted of first-order constructs, such as participant quotes, as well as second-order constructs, which included the interpretations, assumptions, ideas, and statements of previous researchers (Butler et al., 2016). Data that was extracted included the title of the article, author(s), journal publication, publication year, research methodology, and research topic (Chikoko, 2021). Each article was analysed to create detailed notes on the primary content. The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram checklist was used to design and report reviews (Lame, 2019; McMahon et al., 2022; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020; Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022) and as a visual representation of the search process (Butler et al., 2016).

4.6 Data Analysis and Synthesis

An essential step in any systematic review is the analysis and synthesis of the available evidence, which relies on several factors: the number of studies included, the research methods employed, the quality of the evidence, and the selected visualisation or

analytical technique. For reviews that involve only a limited number of studies, which are not suitable for meta-analysis, researchers can create summary tables that highlight criteria such as the research question, the context of analysis, the methods used (or whether the publication is conceptual), sampling methods, and key findings (Linnenluecke et al., 2020). Table 2 illustrates the difference between data analysis and data synthesis as two different steps in this study.

Table 2

The Difference Between Data Analysis and Data Synthesis

| | Data Analysis | Data Synthesis |
|------------|--|---|
| Definition | Data analysis involves the methodical examination and interpretation of qualitative data to uncover patterns, themes, and key insights (Tod, 2019). | Data synthesis involves integrating and combining the findings from multiple studies to create a coherent understanding of a particular phenomenon or research question (Tod, 2019) |
| Focus | Entails examining the commonalities and distinctions within the findings from included studies and identifying patterns (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). | Involves a deeper level of interpretation and creating connections among findings (Flemming & Noyes, 2021) |
| Purpose | The aim is to break down the data into manageable parts to better understand its meaning. This often involves coding the data, identifying recurring themes, and making sense of the relationships within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). | The goal is to draw overarching conclusions from the collective findings of the included studies, moving beyond individual studies to provide a broader perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2021). |

4.6.1 Data Analysis

This section describes how the individual qualitative data sets from the studies included in the review were analysed. This involved coding the data, identifying themes, and extracting insights specific to each study. When it came to the type of data as a consideration, Booth et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of distinguishing between *richness* and *thickness* (p.47). Richness pertains to the conceptual detail of included studies, indicating how well they support theoretical development. Thickness refers to how well the studies identify the situational context. Rich or thick data limits the number of studies a review team can process (Booth et al., 2018). Booth et al. (2022) add that both quality and quantity also influence the choice of method, which is determined by the characteristics of the literature, whether it is quantitative or qualitative. Flemming et al. (2019) explained that qualitative evidence that involves lower or higher levels of conceptual detail can be thought of as poor or rich, while evidence with lower or higher levels of contextual detail are described as thin or thick. According to Booth et al. (2018) the accessibility to resources has an influence on the feasibility of chosen review approaches. The number of people involved, the amount of effort needed, and funding were considered when feasibility was determined (Booth et al., 2018). As stated by Booth et al. (2022), even if resources are limited, a scoping review can still be systematic.

In choosing the appropriate analysis method for this stage of the research, the RETREAT framework of criteria was used (Booth et al., 2018; Flemming et al., 2019) which also allowed the researcher to determine the scale and complexity of the review (Booth et al., 2022). This framework focuses on the following domains: review question, epistemology, timescale, resources, expertise, audience and purpose, and data type. The review or research question establishes what data type is required to answer the specific type of question, thereby also determining the method used to analyse the data. The researcher considered to what extent the review question is fixed or possibly emergent (Booth et al., 2020), or in other words, if it serves as a compass (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). QES ask how and why types of questions (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). This means that the questions are

explanatory in nature and attempt to explore what is known about a specific phenomenon from various perspectives (Booth et al., 2022). Another consideration when it comes to the review question, was whether this study would be a stand-alone study or part of a greater research project (Booth et al., 2018).

The thematic analysis process began with an initial stage of coding the text. Line-by-line free coding was applied to the findings from the primary sources. During this process, the data were analysed for meaning and content. The generated codes were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet, enabling the translation and comparison of codes and concepts across different studies. Examples of codes used are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Examples of Codes Used

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Defining decolonisation | Professional marginalisation | Financial constraints | Pedagogical innovation |
| Historical context | Emotional toll | Lack of leadership | Advocacy and activism |
| Curriculum transformation | Collegial support or isolation | Curricular rigidity | Network building |
| Knowledge production | Imposter syndrome | Fear of backlash | Critical self-reflection |
| Africanisation | Activism vs. scholarship | Racial tension | Precarity |
| Social justice | Institutional resistance | Curriculum redesign | Relationships |
| Identity politics/ conflict | Conservatism in academia | Collaboration | Role conflict |
| Institutional alienation | Perceived threats to standards | Mentorship and support | |

The second phase of thematic analysis focuses on developing descriptive themes. During this stage, the codes were reviewed and interpreted for their underlying meanings, then grouped into related categories. Each category was carefully analysed to determine its defining characteristics. In the third phase, analytical themes were created by comparing the categories to identify patterns, similarities, and differences. Related categories were then combined to form broader constructs, which were further refined through thematic synthesis. This process enabled the identification of overarching themes that not only described the experiences of participants but also provided a basis for deeper interpretation. To understand the lived experiences of academics the focus was on the authors' personal engagement with decolonisation efforts, professional challenges and opportunities, emotional and psychological impact, cultural and identity-related reflections, pedagogical shifts, institutional dynamics, collaboration and solidarity, and reflections on academic knowledge production. Using the interpretivist paradigm as a compass to guide this study on decolonisation efforts in higher education and the lived experiences of social science academics, the data analysis focused on understanding subjective meanings and experiences rather than objective truths, on the subjective and contextualised understanding of decolonisation, and recognising the nuanced, varied, and socially constructed nature of knowledge in different academic settings.

The examination of the gathered data and the development of findings focused on how various academics interpret decolonisation in similar or distinct ways, depending on their personal, institutional, or regional contexts. Additionally, it examined the role of collaborative relationships in decolonising higher education spaces.

4.6.2 Data Synthesis

After analysing the data, the researcher then synthesised the findings across the different studies. This phase involved integrating the descriptive themes developed through thematic analysis to construct a comprehensive understanding of the research question. Thematic synthesis, as described by Flemming and Noyes (2021), builds upon thematic analysis by enabling new interpretations and theoretical insights. Thematic synthesis was

employed to extend the findings from the descriptive themes, allowing for broader conceptual development while ensuring alignment with the study's interpretivist epistemology.

Thematic synthesis methods allow for flexibility in data analysis, accommodating both thick and thin data during the creation of analytical themes through an inductive coding approach (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). This made it particularly suitable for this study, which aimed to synthesise qualitative evidence systematically while maintaining a nuanced understanding of the experiences documented in the literature. The epistemology underlying the study was also considered, as the philosophical foundations of the theoretical framework, in this case, the interpretivist paradigm, needed to remain intact (Booth et al., 2018).

Time and timeframe were other important considerations when selecting the appropriate qualitative synthesis method (Booth et al., 2018). Time and timeframe are defined as both the total time available for the review and the specific timeframe during which the activity is concentrated (Booth et al., 2022). The complexity of the methodology, the scope of the research, and the richness of the data all impacted the duration required to conduct the qualitative evidence synthesis. The limited timeframe available to the researcher necessitated accelerating the process by using purposive criterion-based sampling (Booth et al., 2018).

As this research was literature-based, wider involvement and collaboration were not needed at the time. Generic synthesis expertise, which includes searching, extracting data, assessing quality, and interpretation, is needed for all qualitative evidence synthesis (Booth et al., 2018). The audience and purpose of the chosen qualitative evidence synthesis method were also important considerations, ensuring that the method allowed the researcher to meet the needs of the intended audience (Booth et al., 2018).

Thematic synthesis aimed to achieve a coherent analysis of the content from the included studies. It sought to uncover various factors contributing to understanding the focal point of interest, organising these factors into primary (interpretive) or most prevalent

(aggregative) themes (Booth et al., 2022). Through qualitative evidence synthesis and integration of themes, this study's findings were primarily descriptive. Descriptive findings, according to Flemming et al. (2019), are qualitative evidence-driven findings that translate descriptive themes without extending beyond the primary studies used. This specific level of findings (Flemming et al., 2019) was appropriate for this research, as the primary aim was to explore and describe the experiences of the research subjects rather than to conduct a meta-analysis or generate new theoretical models.

Synthesis involved generating something new from distinct elements rather than merely summarising the findings from primary studies. Synthesising themes from individual studies conducted across diverse settings facilitated the development of new theoretical constructs, models, or thematic frameworks to better understand and explain the phenomena under investigation (Tong et al., 2016).

4.7 Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, systematic reviews in qualitative research should rigorously conduct comprehensive searches, transparently apply selection criteria, assess study quality, synthesise findings coherently, demonstrate reflexivity, seek peer review, and consider the applicability of findings (Nowell et al., 2017). According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), research within the interpretivist paradigm should correspond with the four criteria of authenticity and trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is one of the methods researchers can use to convince readers that the research results are worth paying attention to (Nowell et al., 2017). Trustworthiness involves the criteria of dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail that documented each step of the research process, including search strategies, data selection, coding, and thematic synthesis. The consistency of data interpretation was further reinforced through peer debriefing with the researcher's supervisor and by keeping a systematic and well-organised archive of data sources (Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability was addressed by providing rich

descriptions of the context, setting, and participants of the included studies, allowing readers to determine how the findings relate to their own work (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Credibility was enhanced by triangulating findings across multiple studies to compare key themes and ensure alignment with existing research. Thematic synthesis was conducted with prolonged engagement with the gathered data, supported by detailed documentation of methodological, analytical, and theoretical choices (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach increased the authenticity and reliability of interpretations, making the data more trustworthy.

Confirmability was maintained by recording any assumptions, preconceptions, and decisions throughout the research process. Reflexivity was explicitly applied through a reflexive journal in which the researcher documented personal biases, challenges, and interpretations during data synthesis. Given the interpretivist paradigm and the sensitive nature of decolonisation as a research topic, it was crucial to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and how their background, beliefs, and experiences may have influenced the study (Nowell et al., 2017). Reflexive journaling allowed continuous critical self-examination, ensuring that findings remained as objective as possible.

Ethical considerations, while often linked to studies involving human participants, are equally relevant in systematic reviews. To maintain ethical integrity, the researcher implemented checks and balances to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information used. This included using reputable databases, applying transparent selection criteria, acknowledging potential biases, and verifying the credibility of sources. The peer debriefing process also contributed to ethical rigour by providing an external perspective on data interpretation and decision-making (Booth et al., 2018). These measures ensured that the study upheld ethical standards while maintaining accuracy and trustworthiness in the systematic review process.

As part of ensuring the reliability of this systematic review, the search strategy was peer-reviewed with the guidance of the researcher's supervisor and cross-checked for

alignment with the study's objectives. The research adhered to PRISMA-ScR Item 8, which emphasises transparency in search strategy development and review. Furthermore, a calibration exercise was conducted before full data extraction to ensure consistency. This involved coding a subset of studies, comparing results, and resolving inconsistencies through discussion and iterative refinement. Any discrepancies in coding or thematic categorisation were addressed through collaborative review and revisiting relevant literature.

Given the interpretivist paradigm and the reflexively challenging nature of decolonisation research, it was necessary to acknowledge and critically reflect on the researcher's own positionality. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study by documenting personal reflections, biases, and evolving interpretations in a reflexive journal. The researcher recognises their background, theoretical orientation, and prior knowledge as potential influences on the selection, interpretation, and synthesis of data. These reflections were consistently revisited to ensure that emerging themes were grounded in the data rather than personal biases. The process of self-reflexivity helped mitigate unintentional biases and enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring a continuous interrogation of assumptions and methodological choices. By incorporating structured peer review, systematic calibration, and self-reflexivity, this study enhances transparency, reliability, and credibility in its approach to thematic synthesis.

4.8 Ethical considerations

Qualitative systematic reviews need to be conducted in a manner that upholds ethical standards and ensures the integrity and validity of the findings. Comprehensive records of search history were kept for future reference (Butler et al., 2016) and for all articles that were used, it was ensured that the authors gained informed consent and voluntary participation (Mohd-Arifin, 2018). To ensure that the synthesis and interpretation of the original articles are done in such a way that accurately represents the original research direct quotations from the original studies were included, in-depth thematic analysis was used that stayed as close as possible to the original data, and for each study the context such as cultural, social,

and methodological factors were considered. Findings were interpreted with respect and sensitivity to the original participants' cultural and social contexts (Stangor, 2015; Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). Data extraction processes, analytical methods and search strategies were documented to ensure accountability and transparency (Mohd-Arifin, 2018). Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria for this study (HUM087/0524).

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, qualitative research designs, including systematic reviews and qualitative evidence synthesis, are presented as methods that delve into human experiences and social phenomena, offering nuanced insights that extend beyond individual study findings. Internet-based research, recognised for its versatility, is highlighted as a field that requires stringent ethical measures to protect participants' privacy. This qualitative review employed criterion-based sampling to select studies with contextual richness, focusing on quality over quantity, with criteria such as topic, methods, and timeframe to achieve data saturation. Data collection involved comprehensive searches guided by a structured protocol and the "7 S" approach to ensure methodological rigour. Thematic synthesis through detailed coding and theme development enabled the creation of new theoretical constructs, grounded in the study's theoretical framework. The chapter that follows presents the findings from the included studies according to the themes that were identified.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter first presents a description of the characteristics of the sources that were included. The study analysed 33 sources, including 28 journal articles and five book chapters, focusing on South African higher education decolonisation through qualitative methods, covering diverse social science disciplines, published between 2016 and 2024, and incorporating varied participant demographics and academic experiences. Then, it focuses on themes and subthemes created from the thematic analysis of secondary data. Four main themes and eleven subthemes were generated. The main themes identified were academics' understanding of decolonisation in higher education in South Africa, lived experiences of social science academics in the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa, perceived barriers to decolonisation as experienced by social science academics, and strategies employed by social science academics for decolonisation. Findings from the themes and sub-themes are presented in the chapter.

5.2 Description and Characteristics of Sources Included

The characteristics of the 33 sources analysed are summarised in Table 4. Of these, 28 were journal articles, while five were book chapters from *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience*. To ensure the credibility of the included book, it was evaluated against the following criteria: author expertise, peer review, publication by an academic press, editorial oversight, originality of research, topic relevance, and indexing and availability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Kulczycki, 2018; Liamputtong, 2019).

This study includes articles and book chapters from various social science disciplines, including theology, communication and media studies, psychology, sociology, education, history, political and international studies, anthropology, and developmental studies. Specifically, the collection comprises one study each from theology, communication and media studies, sociology, academic literacy, history, political and international studies,

and developmental studies; three studies each from psychology and anthropology; five studies spanning multiple social science disciplines; seven from unspecified disciplines; and eight from education. Notably, education emerged as the discipline with the most studies on the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. To ensure that the focus is on the lived experiences of authors and participants, only studies that used a qualitative method to explore experiences were included. Thematic qualitative synthesis was used to identify the main themes from analysing academics' lived experiences as discussed in the autoethnographies, case studies, qualitative interpretivist case studies, qualitative interpretivist surveys, conceptual studies, biographical commentaries, and narrative enquiries, included in this research. The number of participants in the studies used ranged from one (as many were autoethnographies) to 28. As the focus of the study is South Africa, no articles focusing on other geographical areas were included. The earliest article included was from 2016, which is significant as this was the time which the students protests happened. The most recent article included was from 2024. The study purposefully included perspectives from different genders, races, and ages as well as various levels of employment and years of experience in academia.

Table 4
Characteristics of Included Sources Reviewed

| | Author (s) | Title | Year | Study Objective/ Aim | Journal | Discipline | Participants | Demographic Characteristics | Methodology |
|---|-------------|--|------|--|--|---------------|--------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Bell et al. | Retrospective autoethnographies: A call for decolonial imaginings for the new university | 2020 | The study aims to use retrospective autoethnographies as a decolonial methodology to critique neoliberal university structures and imagine a radically hopeful "new university." | Qualitative Inquiry | Not specified | 4 | Four black, Indian, Chicana scholar activists | Retrospective autoethnographies |
| 2 | Brunsdon | 'Selfishly backward' or 'selflessly forward?': A | 2019 | The study aims to provide a reflective insider perspective on the challenges | HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies | Theology | 1 | White, middle-aged male | Autoethnography |

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| | white male's insider perspective on a challenge and opportunity of decolonisation for practical theology in the South African context | | and opportunities that decolonisation presents for practical theology in South Africa, particularly from the standpoint of a white male theologian. It explores the urgent call for decolonising knowledge, structures, and epistemologies in higher education, emphasising the choice facing local practical theologians: to resist change ("selfishly backward") | | | | | |
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| | | | | or engage in decolonial transformation ("selflessly forward"). | | | | | |
| 3 | Chasi | Don't teach me nonsense | 2019 | Personal account of a black academic in South African universities, focusing on challenges related to transformation and decolonisation in higher education. | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Communication and media studies | 1 | Black, middle-aged male | Autoethnography |
| 4 | Costa ndius et al. | #Feesmustfall and decolonising the curriculum: Stellenbosch university students' and | 2018 | The study examines the reactions of Stellenbosch University students and lecturers to the #FeesMustFall protests, exploring | South African Journal of Higher Education | Multiple | 28 | White lecturers | Case study |

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| | | lecturers' reactions | | <p>their emotional and relational impacts, the emergence of polarisation and settler perspectives, and the potential role of African centrality in curriculum decolonisation to assist lecturers in transforming their teaching and learning spaces.</p> | | | | | |
| 5 | Daniel s et al. | <p>South African new academics' experiences of precarity: Becoming and unbecoming the</p> | 2024 | <p>The study explores the precarity faced by racially marginalised new academics in South African higher</p> | Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning | <p>Multiple (Humanities, Health Sciences and Higher education)</p> | 4 | <p>Black, three women and one male</p> | Autoethnography |

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| | | condition of coloniality through collective reflexivity | | education as a condition of coloniality and neoliberalism, examining how it shapes identity, reinforces colonial structures, and creates estrangement, while advocating for African-centred epistemologies and collective reflexivity as strategies for transformation and resistance. | | | | | |
| 6 | e | Troubling whiteness: A | 2019 | The study aims to critically examine | PINS | Psychology | 1 | White female | Critical autoethnography |

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| | critical autoethnographi c exploration of being white in the context of calls for the decolonisation | | whiteness and white fragility in the context of decolonising higher education in South Africa through autoethnographic reflexive memory work, highlighting how white self- defensiveness can hinder meaningful engagement. By engaging in critical reflectivity, the author seeks to move beyond defensiveness and explore more constructive ways of | | | | | |
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| | | | | being a white educator in a racially charged academic environment. | | | | | |
| 7 | a | Garust An autoethnography of the feminist pedagogical strategies used in teaching and learning to promote inclusive classrooms | 2023 | The study aims to reflect on the author's pedagogical journey as a feminist lecturer in South African higher education, exploring the tensions in her transition from student to educator and the use of feminist pedagogical strategies to promote inclusive, equitable, and socially just | African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning | Sociology | 1 | Young, black woman | Autoethnography |

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| | | | | <p>classrooms. By employing autoethnography, the study highlights how strategies such as reflexive journaling, dialogue, and mutual vulnerability can disrupt normative classroom power dynamics, create inclusive learning spaces, and challenge gender inequalities in higher education.</p> | | | | | |
| 8 | Hlatshwayo & | "We've been taught to understand that | 2021 | The study aims to explore academics' understanding of | Journal of Education | Education | 8 | Diverse | Qualitative interpretivist case study |

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| <p>Alexander</p> | <p>we don't have anything to contribute towards knowledge": Exploring academics' understanding of decolonising curricula in higher education</p> | <p>decolonising curricula in South African higher education, focusing on how they perceive the need to challenge Eurocentric thought, re-centre African epistemic traditions, and navigate the confusion and discomfort surrounding decolonisation. By using Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, the study examines how</p> | | | | | |
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| | | | | academics in a research-intensive university in KwaZulu-Natal grapple with the ethical demands of transforming curricula as part of the broader project of social justice in the Global South. | | | | | |
| 9 | Hlatshwayo & Ngcob | Are we there yet? An intersectional take on Black women academics' experiences in a | 2023 | The study aims to explore and theorise the complex experiences of black women academics in a South African research-intensive university using an | Journal of Education | Not specified | 10 | Black women | Qualitative interpretivist case study |

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| | | South African university | | intersectional lens, focusing on their challenges in navigating and negotiating their being and belonging. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 black women academics, the study highlights the role of mentoring in supporting their success and access to higher education, concluding with a call for formalised mentoring systems to better support black | | | | | |
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| | | | | women academics in the university | | | | | |
| 1 0 | Jawitz | Unearthing white academics' experience of teaching in higher education in South Africa | 2016 | The study aims to explore and analyse the experiences of white academics teaching at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in the context of racialised dynamics post-Apartheid, focusing on how they navigate the privileges and limitations associated with their whiteness. By examining their narratives, the study highlights how these | Teaching in Higher Education | Purposefully not included | 4 | White males | Qualitative interpretivist case study |

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| | | | | academics position themselves in relation to students and colleagues, and how they grapple with issues such as black student development, an alienating institutional culture, and opposition to the behaviour of white colleagues | | | | | |
| 1 1 | Joubert & Clarence | 'I just feel very dispensable': Exploring the connections between precarity and | 2024 | The study aims to explore how precarious employment in academic literacy development, | Journal of English for Academic Purposes | Academic literacy | 15 | Unspecified | Qualitative surveys and interviews |

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| | identity for academic literacy developers | | particularly in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and academic development programs in South Africa, affects the identity, agency, and sense of legitimacy of staff on fixed-term contracts. By using qualitative surveys and interviews, the study examines how precarity influences professional identity and the sense of purpose for academic literacy | | | | | |
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| | | | | practitioners, and how it impacts their relationships with other academics and students within the university. | | | | | |
| 1 2 | Kgari- Mason do | In pursuit of a decolonised history teacher: Agency and boldness in fostering change | 2020 | The study explores the decolonisation of History teaching by reflecting on the author's journey from a colonised approach to a decolonised curriculum, advocating for the integration of both indigenous and Western knowledge to transform the | International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education & History Culture | History | 1 | Black woman | Autoethnography |

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| | | | | History curriculum in Higher Learning and Basic Education, and highlighting the role of educators in driving this change. | | | | | |
| 1 3 | Khuno u et al. | Black in the academy: Reframing knowledge, the knower, and knowing | 2019 | Chapter of personal accounts of a black academics in South African universities, focusing on challenges related to transformation and decolonisation in higher education. | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Social Sciences | 4 | Black academics at HWU's | Autoethnography |
| 1 4 | Kiguw a | Negotiating the academy: Black bodies " out of place" | 2019 | Chapter of a personal account of a black academic in South African | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Psychology | 1 | Black, lesbian, gender non-conforming academic | Autoethnography |

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| | | | | universities, focusing on challenges related to transformation and decolonisation in higher education. | | | | | |
| 1 5 | Kiguw a & Segalo | Decolonising Psychology in residential and open distance e- learning institutions: Critical reflections | 2018 | The study aims to critically reflect on decolonising Psychology in both residential and open distance e-learning institutions, exploring the explicit, hidden, and null aspects of the curriculum, and addressing issues such as contact, language, and the intersections of | South African Journal of Psychology | Psychology | 2 | Residential and open distance and e-learning insitutions | Conceptual study |

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| | | | | gender, race, and class. It highlights the need to consider the psycho-social biographies of both students and staff in the curriculum and proposes ways to re-imagine a decolonised Psychology curriculum. | | | | | |
| 1 6 | Livingston | Transplanting the fairy tale: An Afrocentric perspective | 2018 | The study aims to explore the potential of decolonising the study of fairy tales within a pre-service teaching degree in South Africa by | Education as Change | Education: English curriculum | Not specified | Not specified | Case study |

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| | | | | challenging European power relations in higher education and promoting Afrocentric thinking. It seeks to develop context-relevant cultural capital through critical engagement with the cultural metaphors in fairy tales, encouraging pre-service teachers to incorporate Afrocentric perspectives rooted in their own cultural | | | | | |
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| | | | | identity into the curriculum. | | | | | |
| 1 7 | Magoq wana et al. | "Forced to care" at the neoliberal university: Invisible labour as academic labour performed by black women academics in the South African university | 2019 | The study aims to examine the invisible labour performed by black women academics in South African universities within the context of neoliberalism and corporatisation of higher education. It argues that these women are subjected to unpaid and unrecognised care work—a form of labour linked to their social and cultural | South African Review of Sociology | Not specified | 3 | Three Black African women academics | Autoethnographies |

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| | | | | <p>roles—which contributes to their marginalisation within academic structures, hindering their professional advancement and reinforcing their exclusion from positions of power.</p> | | | | | |
| 18 | <p>Mahab eer et al.</p> | <p>Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging black women academics in Curriculum Studies at a</p> | 2018 | <p>The study aims to explore the experiences of emerging black women academics in Curriculum Studies at a South African university, using narrative inquiry to</p> | Agenda | <p>Curriculum studies/ Education</p> | 3 | <p>Three Black women academics (African and Indian)</p> | <p>Narrative inquiry</p> |

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| | | university in South Africa | | understand their challenges within a transformative agenda. It highlights the enduring impact of patriarchy and postcolonialism, revealing how disempowering practices undermine their contributions in academia, while also suggesting that black women academics possess the agency to navigate and challenge these systemic barriers to | | | | | |
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| | | | | take ownership of their careers. | | | | | |
| 19 | Maistry & LeGrange | South African higher education as mutating plantation: Critical reflections on navigating a racialised space | 2023 | This study critically reflects on the experiences of academics of colour in South African higher education, arguing that despite the transition from apartheid, the space remains haunted by racial hegemony and anti-blackness, with a neoliberal "plantation" structure that alienates black students and academics, while | Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association | Not specified | 2 | Two academics who identify as Black (historically Indian and Colored) | Narrative inquiry |

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| | | | | exploring the impact of student activism and the challenge of decolonisation amid neoliberal subversion. | | | | | |
| 20 | Mashi yi et al. | Lecturer conceptions of and approaches to decolonisation of curricula in higher education | 2020 | The aim of this study is to investigate lecturers' conceptions and approaches to the decolonisation of curricula in a South African higher education institution, revealing that while decolonisation is viewed as a valuable project for a socially | South African Journal of Higher Education | Education | Not specified | "All the lecturers in a Faculty of Education in the Western Cape" | Qualitative interpretivist surveys |

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| | | | | <p>just society, its complexity requires shared understandings and multi-disciplinary approaches for successful implementation across disciplines.</p> | | | | | |
| 2 1 | Matthe ws | <p>Decolonising while white: Confronting race in a South African classroom</p> | 2021 | <p>The aim of this study is to explore how white academics can meaningfully contribute to decolonising university curricula in South Africa, emphasising the need for white</p> | Teaching in Higher Education | Political and International studies | 1 | White woman | Autoethnography |

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|---|-------|---------------|------|--|--|--------------|---|-------------|-------------------------|
| | | | | <p>individuals to critically engage with their whiteness and the ambivalence it brings, ensuring that their participation does not inadvertently reinforce the very hierarchies decolonial struggles aim to dismantle.</p> | | | | | |
| 2 | Mkhw | What good is | | The aim of this study is to explore the essential role of care work in the practice of anthropology in South Africa, | Journal of the American Ethnological Society | Anthropology | 1 | Black woman | Biographical commentary |
| 2 | anazi | anthropology? | 2023 | highlighting how | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|--------------|--|------|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|---------------|------------|
| | | | | anthropologists, as well as their students and interlocutors, enact various forms of care in their work, and reflecting on the potential of anthropology to attend to these diverse expressions of care. | | | | | |
| 2 3 | Morrei ra | Steps towards decolonial higher education in Southern Africa? Epistemic disobedience in the Humanities | 2017 | The aim of this study is to examine humanities courses in South African universities that intentionally challenge existing epistemic | Journal of Asian and African Studies | Anthropology & Education | 2 | Not specified | Case study |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------|--|------|--|---|--------------------------------|---|---------------|------------|
| | | | | <p>hierarchies, by analysing how African knowledge is prioritised and exploring the potential for change in higher education through the generation and teaching of African-centered theories.</p> | | | | | |
| 24 | Morreira et al. | <p>Place and pedagogy: Using space and materiality in teaching social science in Southern Africa</p> | 2020 | <p>The aim of this study is to explore pedagogic innovation in undergraduate social science teaching at post-independence universities in</p> | <p>Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal</p> | <p>Social Anthropology</p> | 2 | Not specified | Case study |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|--------|---------------------------------|------|--|----------------------|----------|---|---------|-----------------|
| | | | | <p>Southern Africa, focusing on the use of space and materiality to promote "emplacement," which allows students to situate themselves as embodied, knowledge-making individuals within specific social, economic, and political contexts, contributing to decolonial education.</p> | | | | | |
| 2 5 | Müller | A critical arts-based narrative | 2018 | The aim of this study is to explore the | Journal of Education | Multiple | 5 | Diverse | Narrative study |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| | of five educators working in higher education during an era of transformation in South Africa | | identities and experiences of five educators working at the University of the Free State during a period of transformation and decolonisation, using a creative arts-based narrative to critically engage with educator identity, anti-oppressive practices, and the intersection of social justice and higher education in South Africa. | | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----------|---|------|---|---|-----------------------|---|---------------------------|-----------------|
| 26 | Nathane | Sitting on the bum: The struggle of survival and belonging for a black African woman in the academy | 2019 | Chapter of a personal account of a black academic in South African universities, focusing on challenges related to transformation and decolonisation in higher education. | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Not specified | 1 | Black African woman | Autoethnography |
| 27 | Phaswana | The limits of being and knowledge in the academy | 2019 | Chapter of a personal account of a black academic in South African universities, focusing on challenges related to transformation and decolonisation in higher education. | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Developmental Studies | 1 | Black South African woman | Autoethnography |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|------------------------------|---|------|--|------------------------------|-----------|---|---------------|---|
| 2 8 | Pillay & Swane poel | An exploration of higher education teachers' experience of decolonising the Bachelor of Education honours curriculum | 2019 | The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of eight higher education lecturers at a South African university involved in a curriculum decolonisation process for a Bachelor of Education honours program, focusing on how they rethought ways of knowing, deconstructed old epistemologies, and navigated challenges related to Afrocentric | Perspectives in Education | Education | 8 | Not specified | Qualitative interpretivist case study |
|--------|------------------------------|---|------|--|------------------------------|-----------|---|---------------|---|

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|------------------------------------|--|------|--|---|--------|----|---|-------------------|
| | | | | and Western knowledge systems, with the aim of fostering societal change and transforming classroom practices. | | | | | |
| 2 9 | Pithou se- Morga n et al. | Sink or swim?: Learning from stories of becoming academics within a transforming university terrain | 2016 | The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of early-career academics and doctoral students in a transforming university environment by using narrative inquiry and poetry, highlighting the importance of | South African Journal of Higher Education | Varied | 12 | Seven black women, four black men and one white man | Narrative inquiry |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------------|---|------|--|----------------------|-----------|----|---|-------------------|
| | | | | collegial relationships in fostering self-belief, resourcefulness, and mutual support in academic development. | | | | | |
| 30 | Sathor ar & Gedul d | Reflecting on lecturer dispositions to decolonise teacher education | 2019 | The objective of this study is to examine lecturers' dispositions towards decolonising teacher education in South Africa, and to propose a framework that supports these dispositions in engaging with decolonisation efforts, particularly in | Journal of Education | Education | 20 | 20 Participants: 10 female, 10 male, 7 Black, 1 Coloured and 10 White. All 50+ years old | Narrative inquiry |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----------------|--|------|--|---|-----------|---|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| | | | | the context of an increasingly diverse student population and ongoing curriculum transformation. | | | | | |
| 31 | Senekal & Lenz | Decolonising the South African higher education curriculum: An investigation into the challenges | 2020 | The objective of this study is to investigate the challenges faced in the decolonisation of the South African higher education curriculum, examining the tension between Western-centric academic structures and the need to | International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies | Education | 9 | Not specified | Qualitative interpretivist case study |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|-------------|---|------|--|---|-----------|----|---------------|--|
| | | | | integrate African knowledge, and exploring the feasibility of developing curricula that incorporate both African and European knowledge systems to meet the needs of students. | | | | | |
| 3 2 | Siband a | Academics' conceptions of higher education decolonisation | 2021 | The objective of this study is to explore and analyze academics' conceptions of higher education decolonisation in South Africa, particularly focusing | South African Journal of Higher Education | Education | 13 | Not specified | Biographical commentary/ Conceptual |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|---------|---|------|---|---|---------------|---|---------------|------------|
| | | | | <p>on their views of recentring or decentring knowledge, the conflation of Afrocentric philosophy and Africanisation with decolonisation, and the need for broader discussions on these concepts before implementing curriculum decolonisation.</p> | | | | | |
| 33 | Waghi d | Decolonising the African university again | 2021 | <p>The objective of this study is to argue that the African university must be decolonised</p> | South African Journal of Higher Education | Not specified | 1 | Not specified | Case study |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | | | | to enhance humanisation, rehumanisation, and cosmopolitan pluriversalism, and to emphasize that without the university embracing its role in liberation, resistance, and advancing cosmopolitan ideals, the decolonisation of the African university will remain unattainable. | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|

The four themes and subthemes identified for this study are included in Table 5.

Table 5

Themes and Subthemes

| Themes | Subthemes |
|--|--|
| 1. Academics' understanding of decolonisation in higher education in South Africa | |
| 2. Lived Experiences of Social Science Academics in the Decolonisation of Higher Education in South Africa | 2.1 Identity and Positionality of Academics in Academia 2.2 Sense of Belonging within the Academia 2.3 Mental health and well-being of academics 2.4 Power dynamics and relationships 2.5 New academics and experiences of precarity in academia |
| 3. Perceived barriers to decolonisation as experienced by social science academics | 3.1 Institutional resistance 3.2 Eurocentrism in knowledge production 3.3 Balancing role conflicts in academia |
| 4. Strategies employed by academics for decolonisation | 4.1 Curriculum and Pedagogical reforms 4.2 Collaboration and community building |

Table 6 illustrates which themes correspond with each of the articles included in the systematic review.

Table 6
Articles and Their Corresponding Themes

| Author(s) | Title | Year | Theme code |
|------------------------|--|------|------------------------------|
| Bell et al. | Retrospective Autoethnographies: A Call for Decolonial Imaginings for the New University | 2020 | 2.1; 3.1; 3.2 |
| Brunsdon | "Selfishly backward" or 'selflessly forward?': A white male's insider perspective on a challenge and opportunity of decolonisation for practical theology in the South African context | 2019 | 2.1; 3.2 |
| Chasi | Don't teach me nonsense | 2019 | 2.3; 4.1 |
| Costandius et al. | #Feesmustfall and decolonising the curriculum: Stellenbosch university students' and lecturers' reactions | 2018 | 1.1; 2.1; 3.1 |
| Daniels et al. | South African new academics' experiences of precarity: Becoming and unbecoming the condition of coloniality through collective reflexivity | 2024 | 2.1; 2.2; 2.4; 3.1 |
| Frizelle | Troubling whiteness: A critical autoethnographic exploration of being white in the context of calls for the decolonisation | 2019 | 2.1; 3.2; |
| Garusta | An Autoethnography of the Feminist Pedagogical Strategies Used in Teaching and Learning to Promote Inclusive Classrooms | 2023 | 2.1; 2.3; 3.1; 4.1 |
| Hlatshwayo & Alexander | "We've been taught to understand that we don't have anything to contribute towards knowledge": Exploring academics' understanding of decolonising curricula in higher education | 2021 | 1.1; 3.2 |
| Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo | Are we there yet? An intersectional take on Black women academics' experiences in a South African university | 2023 | 2.1; 2.3; 2.4 |
| Jawitz | Unearthing white academics' experience of teaching in higher education in SA | 2016 | 2.1 |
| Joubert & Clarence | "I just feel very dispensable": Exploring the connections between precarity and identity for academic literacy developers | 2024 | 2.4 |
| Kgari-Masondo | In pursuit of a decolonised history teacher: Agency and boldness in fostering change | 2020 | 2.1; 4.1 |
| Khunou et al. | Black in the academy: Reframing knowledge, the knower, and knowing | 2019 | 2.1 |
| Kiguwa | Negotiating the academy: Black bodies "out of place" | 2019 | 2.1; 2.3 |
| Kiguwa & Segalo | Decolonising Psychology in residential and open distance e-learning institutions: critical reflections | 2018 | 4.1 |
| Livingston | Transplanting the Fairy Tale: An Afrocentric Perspective | 2018 | 3.2 |
| Magoqwana et al. | "Forced to care" at the Neoliberal University: Invisible Labour as Academic Labour Performed by Black Women Academics in the South African University | 2019 | 2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 3.1; 3.3; 4.2 |
| Mahabeer et al. | Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging Black women academics in Curriculum Studies at a university in South Africa | 2018 | 2.1; 3.3 |
| Maistry & Le Grange | South African Higher Education as Mutating Plantation: Critical Reflections on Navigating a Racialized Space | 2023 | 2.1; 3.1 |
| Mashiye et al. | Lecturer conceptions of and approaches to decolonisation of curricula in higher education | 2020 | 1.1; 3.2 |
| Matthews | Decolonising while white: confronting race in a South African classroom | 2021 | 2.1 |
| Mkhwanazi | What good is anthropology? | 2023 | 2.2; 3.1 |
| Morreira | Steps Towards Decolonial Higher Education in Southern Africa? Epistemic Disobedience in the Humanities | 2017 | 3.1; 4.2 |
| Morreira et al. | Place and pedagogy: using space and materiality in teaching social science in Southern Africa | 2020 | 4.1 |
| Müller | A critical arts-based narrative of five educators working in higher education during an era of transformation in South Africa | 2018 | 2.1; 2.2 |
| Nathane | Sitting on the bum: The struggle of survival and belonging for a black African woman in the academy | 2019 | 2.1; 2.3; 3.3 |
| Phaswana | The limits of being and knowledge in the academy | 2019 | 2.1; 3.2; 4.1 |
| Pillay & Swanepoel | An exploration of higher education teachers' experience of decolonising the Bachelor of Education honours curriculum | 2019 | 1.1 |
| Pithouse-Morgan et al. | Sink or swim?: Learning from stories of becoming academics within a transforming university terrain | 2016 | 2.3; 2.4 |
| Sathorar & Geduld | Reflecting on lecturer dispositions to decolonise teacher education | 2019 | 1.1 |
| Senekal & Lenz | Decolonising the South African Higher Education Curriculum: An investigation into the challenges | 2020 | 1.1; 3.2; 3.1 |
| Sibanda | Academics' conceptions of higher education decolonisation | 2021 | 1.1; 3.2 |
| Waghid | Decolonising the African University again | 2021 | 2.1; 3.1; 3.2 |

5.3 Theme 1: Academics' Understanding of Decolonisation in Higher Education in South Africa

This theme explores how academics from the included studies define and interpret decolonisation within their disciplines or institutions by examining their perspectives on decolonisation in South African higher education. Findings from the included studies suggest that academics are unsure of what the decolonisation of higher education institutions means

(Costandius et al., 2018; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018; Mashiyi et al., 2020; Pillay & Swanepoel, 2019). Different academic disciplines create knowledge in unique ways which leads to different understandings and decolonisation approaches among academics (Mashiyi et al., 2020). This illustrates the complex and multifaceted nature of decolonisation; a concept that is not neutral or apolitical but shaped by dominant curriculum frameworks and political ideologies (Mashiyi et al., 2020). As one participant stated, “the concept of decolonisation has a racial and political meaning” (p.156).

Participants in Sibanda’s (2020) study on academics’ conceptions of higher education decolonisation revealed that academics demonstrated considerable uncertainty when defining decolonisation. Their interpretation includes concepts such as legitimising and valuing all forms of knowledge, striving for parity among different knowledges, and expanding access to universities for a broader range of students. Some participants described it as “an African view of things” (p.192) and emphasised the importance of reimagining knowledge, curricula, and problem-solving strategies.

The findings from the included studies indicate a strong consensus among participants regarding the need for the decolonisation of the curriculum as a necessary response to addressing and critically engaging with Eurocentric perspectives by dismantling colonial structures and incorporating indigenous knowledge systems. Academics highlighted the over-representation of European content in the curriculum at South African universities and advocated for the inclusion of African academics’ perspectives and experiences allowing for a more progressive and relevant Afrocentric curriculum (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021; Pillay & Swanepoel, 2019; Senekal & Lenz, 2020; Sibanda, 2021). According to participants from the included studies, this shift is essential for advancing social justice, ensuring cultural inclusion, and providing significant access to knowledge within the South African education system. By addressing power dynamics and cultural dominance, and embracing values like equality, redress, equity, anti-racism, and inclusivity, university content can be contextualised

to improve student relatability (Mashiya et al., 2020; Sathorar & Geduld, 2019; Senekal & Lenz, 2020; Sibanda, 2021).

Participants in Senekal and Lenz's (2020) study expressed a preference for reducing the focus on decolonisation and preserving the status quo. Although most participants in Sibanda's (2021) study expressed their support for decolonisation, a few noted that their agreement depended on the specific definition of decolonisation. One participant opposed the idea of decolonisation, arguing knowledge in some fields (such as mathematics and physics) is fixed and should not be altered.

Overall, responses from participants in Sibanda's (2021) study highlighted that while there is significant support for decolonisation, the interpretation of what it entails varies among academics, indicating a need for clarity in discussions about its implementation in universities. As one participant stated "although a precise singular definition of decolonisation is, in my view, neither possible nor desirable; academics' conception of the nuanced nature of decolonisation merits scrutiny, considering that they are arguably, the single most important stakeholder in curriculum design, development, implementation and evaluation. Clarity of conception on their part would ensure they do not implement one thing in the name of the other" (p.183). Findings from Mashiya et al.'s (2020) study indicated that should there exist a shared understanding of the meaning of decolonisation across disciplines by adopting a participatory, transdisciplinary, consultative approach, meaningful progress may be made in achieving the decolonisation of higher education.

5.4 Theme 2: Lived Experiences of Social Science Academics in the Decolonisation of Higher Education in South Africa

This theme explores the personal and professional experiences of social science academics involved in the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. It examines how these academics navigate, interpret, and contribute to decolonisation efforts within their institutions and disciplines, highlighting challenges, motivations, and the impact of these

initiatives on their work and identity in five sub-themes. The first subtheme focuses on identity and positionality by investigating findings of how academics' identity (in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and age) influences their approach to decolonisation. This includes exploring how social science academics navigate their positionality within a predominantly Western academic environment and their sense of self-worth and belonging. The second subtheme focuses on the sense of belonging academics experience in their work environments. The third subtheme, mental health and well-being of academics, focus on emotional and intellectual labour by looking at the toll on academics engaging in decolonial work, including marginalisation, burnout, or isolation. The fourth subtheme focuses on the power dynamics and relationships between academics and their peers, students and other faculty. The fifth subtheme explores the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by early-career academics, especially regarding job insecurity, unstable employment conditions, and the emotional, financial, and professional impacts of precarious work environments.

5.4.1 Sub-Theme 2.1: Identity and Positionality of Academics in the Academia

Müller (2018) reflects on their research into anti-oppressive education, noting the importance of revisiting past experiences—starting as far back as childhood—to make sense of their current identity. Through this reflective process, Müller recognised the limitations of focusing solely on personal experiences and emphasised the need to engage with the stories of others. Listening to different perspectives allowed for a deeper understanding beyond the researcher's own narrative. This process of moving beyond the self, highlights the interconnectedness of individuals and positions the self as fluid, multiple, and shaped by interactions with others, rather than as fixed or essentialised.

By using a theory that foregrounds subjectivity as complex, multiple, and assembled, I hope to make a contribution to how transformation, social justice, and decolonisation can be understood as a micro-project that (partially) emerges and unfolds in the lives, experiences, identities, memories, interactions, and becoming of educators working in higher education. By focusing on the becoming of educators

through engagement with creative self-reflexive practices, I hope to centre the change-of-self as part of the decolonisation process as a way to move beyond fixed and essentialised identities as we explore the entanglements with others and search for new ways of being.

(Müller, 2018, p.91)

Phaswana (2019), in their autoethnography, aligns their black identity with those whom Frantz Fanon refers to as belonging to the "zone of non-being" (p.158) —individuals whose ancestry has subjected them to ongoing global exclusion and marginalisation. This shared experience of exclusion unites black people in their collective fight against dehumanisation. The term 'black people,' as used in this context, warrants closer scrutiny. Racial categories such as this are not inherent or natural but are socially constructed, deeply rooted in the colonial system that sought to categorize and oppress various populations (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The very idea of a unified 'black' identity often glosses over the complex and diverse experiences of different groups that have been labeled as 'black.' Furthermore, while the statement focuses on the exclusion of 'black people,' the experience of marginalisation can extend to other groups of colour globally who share the effects of coloniality. The interconnectedness of colonial histories across the globe means that the experience of exclusion and dehumanisation is not confined to one racial or ethnic group but is a shared condition among many communities who have suffered under colonial systems of power. This framing suggests that the fight against coloniality must transcend narrowly defined racial identities and instead focus on the collective struggle of people of colour globally, united by the shared experience of exclusion and oppression resulting from colonial systems. Such a broader coalition challenges the colonial construction of race and offers a more inclusive vision of decolonial resistance (Campbell-Stephens, 2021).

It is crucial to interpret what it means to be classified as "black" in such a racialised context. The experience of being racialised as "black" goes beyond mere classification—it is a lived reality that shapes how one navigates the world, often being subjected to

dehumanising stereotypes and exclusionary practices. While studying in the UK, Phaswana (2019) observed how the colonial, capitalist, and competitive structures of society can lead black foreigners to unintentionally contribute to the racialisation of local black academics. This happens because being viewed as a “better black” in racially stratified settings can provide certain academic advantages. In this context, better black refers to the phenomenon in which black foreigners—often African or Caribbean immigrants—are perceived as more favourable or better in certain institutional or social contexts than British-born black individuals. This perception is driven by the dynamics of racialisation and the logic of competition within racialised spaces, where institutions and individuals, often influenced by stereotypes, differentiate between black people based on origin, cultural background, or perceived demeanour. Within the British academy, this positioning leads to black African and Caribbean immigrants being seen as the “preferred other” (p.158), contrasting with British-born black academics, who are instead viewed as the quintessential other. This division is influenced by stereotypes that suggest, for instance, that British-born blacks might be lazy or entitled, whereas black immigrants are seen as hard-working or more compliant. Phaswana identifies as South African to align with a group of black academics who, due to their historical and political background, have often been perceived as lacking motivation, capability, or qualifications to teach at historically white institutions in South Africa. This is not just a personal identification; it is a recognition of the complex, racialised positioning within the academy that often forces black individuals to either conform to or challenge stereotypical expectations. These assumptions have reinforced damaging stereotypes and weakened black solidarity in academia. The racialisation of blackness within these institutional contexts shows how the racial classification itself can be weaponised to divide and control, even among those who share a history of exclusion.

Kgari-Masondo (2020) reflects on how their upbringing during the height of apartheid shaped their identity as a black woman, deeply influencing their mindset. This experience moulded them into a confident African indigenous woman, committed to challenging

injustices and speaking out. The author identifies as an Africanist, dedicated to correcting the historical misrepresentations of Indigenous people in various disciplines, including history. Mahabeer et al. (2018) discovered that black women in South African academia continue to face marginalisation, influenced by ongoing patriarchy and the enduring effects of apartheid and postcolonialism. Despite discussions on transformation and development, subtle practices within institutions, shaped by white imperialist patriarchy, continue to diminish the experiences and contributions of black women academics. The study (Mahabeer et al., 2018) also reveals that both men and, at times, some black women contribute to the subjugation of other women. Some women in academia, despite being part of the institution, undermine solidarity among black women by participating in exclusionary practices, creating a hostile environment, and disregarding the importance of unity in previously white-dominated spaces. As noted by one participant: “The shift from ‘student’ to ‘colleague’ proved difficult for some female academics who continuously treated me more as a student rather than a colleague” (Mahabeer et al., 2018, p.37). The participant expressed disappointment in discovering that, despite expecting to be accepted as a colleague and equal, other women used her lack of a PhD and novice status to marginalise and distance her. Black women, often stereotyped as voiceless and overly emotional, are frequently discouraged from expressing their emotions to avoid being seen as vulnerable (Kgari-Masondo, 2020). However, the findings from the included literature indicate that black women academics, particularly feminist scholars, possess the agency and ability to overcome these vulnerabilities and take charge of their careers when provided with the right opportunities (Kgari-Masondo, 2020; Mahabeer et al., 2018).

Khunou et al. (2019), drawing on autoethnographies, argue that the exclusion of black people from the prestigious space of universities is deliberate, positioning them as lifelong students while white individuals continue to dominate knowledge production. To rationalise this exclusion, merit-based discourses are employed, suggesting that black people are not yet ready to contribute as knowledge creators in academic spaces. This

dynamic persists in the academy, where universities, as global power structures, uphold neoliberal hegemonic policies. The presence of black women in academia challenges those who have historically excluded them from knowledge production. Khunou et al. (2019) highlight that black women are not simply participants; they strive to share their experiences, emotions, and perspectives, asserting that these deserve recognition and inclusion in the historical narrative. The authors aim to tell their stories and proudly declare, "We were here" (p.4).

Maistry and Le Grange (2023) argue that restoring blackness involves reshaping the stories of the lives of black individuals by challenging the deficit-based narratives imposed by colonial discourse. These harmful narratives are continuously reinforced within the context of ongoing coloniality and neoliberal capitalism. Restoring blackness seeks to validate and legitimise the lived experiences of black people as a way to counter the pervasive anti-blackness embedded in these systems.

Kiguwa (2019) explores the ambivalence felt by black academics in post-apartheid South Africa during pivotal racial encounters. These academics often question their own experiences of racial subjectification, as they are frequently accused of being overly sensitive or paranoid when confronting racism. The findings suggest that the challenge lies in recognising these moments as forms of exclusion from academia. Furthermore, the subtle yet powerful informal institutional cultures within departments perpetuate hegemonic practices that marginalise and exclude already disadvantaged individuals. Kiguwa describes the sense of being out of place in academia, characterised by infantilisation, dismissal, and a lack of recognition of their academic and research competence. The author also highlights an awareness of decisions and discussions being made about them without their input or consent. Kiguwa's multiple, intersecting identities place them in a complex position as both an insider and outsider, navigating the privileges and challenges of being both visible and invisible. This experience emphasises how academia values certain forms of cultural capital, which impacts the author's status and sense of belonging within the institution.

Kiguwa (2019) critically examines the ambivalence felt by black academics in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly in their encounters with racial subjectification within academia. While these academics often question their experiences, being accused of hypersensitivity or paranoia when confronting racism, it is essential to explore the implications of their visibility and invisibility within the institution. What does it signify for the decolonisation of higher education when a black academic is both seen and ignored? Kiguwa's findings suggest that the challenge lies in recognising these moments as exclusionary mechanisms, which are deeply embedded in the subtle yet powerful informal institutional cultures that perpetuate hegemonic practices. These practices, such as infantilisation, dismissal, and lack of recognition of academic competence, are not just interpersonal but institutional forces that marginalise disadvantaged individuals, especially black academics who do not conform to traditional forms of cultural capital valued by the institution.

The neoliberal university facilitates this silencing by creating an environment where only certain forms of cultural capital, such as academic output and visible success, are celebrated, while other experiences of marginalisation are minimised or ignored. As Kiguwa (2019) writes, "I would argue that part of the dilemma has to do with the almost invisible nature of informal institutional cultures... these function to reinforce and sustain hegemonic practices, spaces, and traditions of the academy that are exclusive to already marginalised bodies" (p.11). This reflects how neoliberal policies prioritise measurable success over the academic and intellectual flourishing of marginalised groups. As Kiguwa's own experience highlights, black academics often navigate complex positions of both insider and outsider, where their intellectual contributions are either overlooked or tokenised. The pressure to fit within this system—exemplified by the demand for 'black excellence'—further marginalises their authentic academic identities and experiences. This contradiction speaks to the broader challenge of decolonising higher education, where the recognition of diversity and inclusivity is often undermined by the neoliberal system that still upholds hegemonic practices rooted in

whiteness and competition. Thus, Kiguwa's analysis demonstrates how neoliberal institutions, while claiming to support diversity, often reproduce exclusion through the very structures that are supposed to provide support, further complicating the decolonisation efforts within higher education.

Findings show that black authors in the included studies often feel they cannot afford to fail due to immense pressure from both universities and families (Bell et al., 2020; Kiguwa, 2019; Mahabeer et al., 2018), which hold them to unattainable standards and labels like black excellence (Kiguwa, 2019) and black female exceptionalism (Mahabeer et al., 2018). Black women academics encounter increased pressure to demonstrate their value and abilities, influenced by their gendered and racial histories and educational experiences. Universities create competition by pitting academics against each other, leaving little room for failure (Bell et al., 2020). Neoliberal policies further exacerbate this competition, instrumentalising individuals and fostering division among black academics, while institutional cultures continue to protect and uphold whiteness (Khunou et al., 2019).

Bantu education¹ historically positioned black individuals as perpetual children needing white supervision. The author expressed a desire to understand the qualifications necessary to be included in certain groups, often feeling a powerful message that their perceived deficits, primarily linked to their skin colour, excluded them from the in-group in academia. The only distinction between their peers and themselves was skin tone, with evidence indicating that lighter skin was associated with being perceived as better and more deserving. This historical reality continues to resonate in the present experiences of black individuals in post-apartheid South Africa (Nathane, 2019).

When one of the black women authors from Daniels et al. (2024) was appointed in a permanent academic position, they encountered religious intolerance and gender inequality, which undermined key aspects of their identity and silenced their voice. This affected their

¹ Bantu Education in South Africa was an apartheid-era policy and educational system designed specifically for Black South Africans, aimed at enforcing racial segregation and maintaining white supremacy by limiting educational and economic opportunities for non-white populations.

teaching, as presenting their full, authentic academic self was crucial for their efforts to transform student support services within the faculty. To lead this change, the author needed the confidence to challenge institutional norms, setting an example for others to follow (Daniels et al., 2024). In discussing their finding of precarity as a coherent sense of self, the authors (Daniels et al., 2024) explore the emotional aspects of precarity, which stem from the marginalisation of invisible labour. Nathane (2019) found that despite a growing number of black African women attaining doctorates, they continue to be largely overlooked within higher education institutions. In South Africa, women, particularly black African women, continue to be marginalised in the field of knowledge production. They are often not recognised as credible contributors to academic discourse and are dismissed as legitimate producers of knowledge. This connects to the subtheme of new academics and their experiences of precarity, which will be explored later. The marginalisation of black African women in academia has significant implications for newcomers in the field, particularly in terms of the instability and insecurity they face. This exclusion reflects deep-rooted systemic biases within academia, where certain voices—especially those of black African women—are often overlooked or disregarded, impacting their career advancement, credibility, and overall influence in knowledge production. For new academics, especially black African women, this exclusion intensifies the sense of precarity.

Autoethnographies written from a white male perspective (Brunsdon, 2019) illustrated the struggle and tension some academics have in reconciling their own role in the history of oppression and the new role they wish to have in joining the decolonisation efforts. While some recognise their positionality and responsibility, and how it might cause distrust and that they may not be welcome at the table of decolonisation (Brunsdon, 2019), others held perspectives of ignorance and distance, fear of regression, racism, guilt and exclusion. One participant from Costandius et al.'s (2018) study commented that they "... feel like sitting on the fence and waiting for it to go away" (p.76). Costandius et al. (2018) uncovered what the authors termed *settlers' perspectives* (p.65), which included selective silence, polarisation, and feelings of doubt, confusion, anger, powerlessness, and disappointment among white

academics. The responses of most participating academics were notably negative, with some expressing surprise at the intensity of student protests at the time—an indication that may suggest ignorance on the part of lecturers. Regarding relationships with students, white lecturers reported discomfort and uncertainty when interacting with black students, with experiences marked by anxiety, fear, and powerlessness (Costandius et al., 2018).

A study on the experiences of four white male academics at UCT (Jawitz, 2016) reveals how racial identity shapes teaching practices in the racially charged context of South African higher education. Their accounts highlight a greater awareness of their white identity, challenging the stereotype that white academics are unaware of racial dynamics. These individuals positioned themselves as allies to black students, criticising the behaviours of their white colleagues that perpetuate a culture of alienation. Despite their efforts to support transformation, they grapple with the paradox of their white privilege, acknowledging both its advantages and the limitations it imposes in understanding black students' experiences. While distancing themselves from conservative, racist discourses, they also navigate the stigma of whiteness through selective silence, which may inadvertently uphold dominant racial norms. This study underscores the need for further research to address how white academics' interactions within this racialised space may continue to reinforce a hostile institutional environment for black students.

Frizelle (2019) reflects on their experience as a white female lecturer in post-apartheid South Africa, where race plays an important part in educational spaces within higher education. The author struggles with how to position themselves as an academic in a space where the decolonisation of education and African psychology are being discussed, while race remains a pervasive issue in everyday academic life. Recognising race as a social, political, and historical construct, and whiteness as a privileged position with psychological, cultural, political, and economic implications, Frizelle initially felt trapped in guilt, believing that apologising for their whiteness was the only appropriate response.

However, the author eventually realised that this approach was unhelpful if it resulted in inaction rather than driving meaningful change.

Acknowledging that they cannot detach themselves from their identity as a white South African shaped by apartheid, Frizelle decided to engage with this identity critically. Through self-reflection, the author confronted their defensiveness and discomfort, allowing them to explore how to position themselves as a white educator in this context. By embracing discomfort instead of avoiding or reacting to it, Frizelle gained insight into their emotional responses, including shame, guilt, and anger, particularly in interactions with black students. Although these emotions are complex and do not easily resolve, engaging with them through reflective practice has helped the author become aware of their white fragility and take responsibility for their role in the broader system of social injustice. This critical engagement has allowed for more constructive participation in both their academic and social environments.

Matthews (2021) contends that identity plays a crucial role in discussions about decoloniality, particularly emphasising the need for white academics to carefully consider how their whiteness impacts their contributions to decolonial scholarship. The author highlights the ambivalence in white efforts to decolonise university curricula, suggesting that this complexity must be acknowledged and addressed rather than ignored. Without such recognition, the involvement of white academics in decolonial movements may end up serving their own need to alleviate guilt, rather than actively dismantling the hierarchical structures that decolonial efforts aim to challenge. In concluding, the author acknowledges the overall support and openness received from both students and colleagues in efforts to decolonise the curriculum. However, occasional hostile responses have served as valuable reminders to avoid complacency and deepen understanding. The author notes that the persistent and entrenched layers of racism and colonial oppression are complex and difficult to dismantle. This justifies, to some extent, the scepticism from black academics towards white involvement in curriculum decolonisation. The author suggests that white contributors

should approach their participation with more caution, avoiding the assumption that their commitment to decolonisation automatically grants them the status of redeemed individuals. Ironically, the act of writing this reflection may itself fall into the trap of seeking validation through participation. The author concludes by acknowledging the difficulty in determining the right way for white academics to engage in decolonial efforts, but emphasises the importance of continuing to move forward, despite the challenges (Matthews, 2021).

Through the use of visual and textual portraits of five educators from the University of the Free State, Muller (2018) highlights the emotional and experiential aspects of transformation and decolonisation. These portraits revealed the disconnection between the aspirations of educators and the realities they face in and outside the classroom. They shift the focus from grand narratives of decolonisation to the personal, everyday experiences of educators in higher education. The findings suggest that educators committed to social justice must constantly relearn and unlearn existing knowledge. This process requires educators to question established norms and move beyond binary thinking, pushing the boundaries of what they know and who they are. By using visual/textual portraits, the study emphasised an affective engagement with new possibilities, rather than providing a complete or descriptive analysis of educators' experiences.

5.4.2 Sub-Theme 2.2: Sense of Belonging within Academia

Participants and authors in the included studies from marginalised backgrounds recount experiencing institutional alienation or facing extra burdens in navigating systems that often uphold dominant norms (Bayeck, 2022). Academia is not only a contested space but also carries a strong sense of alienation, especially for Nathane (2019) as a black African woman who grew up under apartheid and received a Bantu education. The institutional culture often views the author through a lens of deficiency, treating them as lacking rather than valuing their contributions. As the author writes, “the message was powerful and clear for me even in those early formative years; there was some form of deficit I had that did not qualify me to be part of the in-group, and this deficit was the wrong colour of skin”(p.183).

Academia imposes standards that are top-down and authoritative, and the author feels the pressure to constantly prove themselves. At times, the author struggled to meet these standards, experiencing them as exclusionary mechanisms designed to prevent their success. Much of this struggle stems from the challenges of fulfilling employment probation requirements, which did not exist when these institutions were a comfortable and exclusive space for privileged groups (Nathane, 2019). As the author states, “I have often experienced this community as hostile and have felt that I do not belong. I was told by one powerful individual within this community that if I did not meet certain criteria for my three-year probation requirements, I would be asked to leave the community” (p.189).

Black women in academia continue to encounter significant obstacles related to class, gender, and race, often being perceived as "space invaders" (p.29), implying their presence is disruptive in institutions historically dominated by white, middle-class men within imperialist, white supremacist, and capitalist structures. These challenges lead to doubts about their intelligence, competence, and legitimacy, casting them as outsiders or intruders within the academic space (Mahabeer et al., 2018). One participant notes feelings of “anger, doubt, fear, frustration, low morale, inferiority and inefficiency, as we were expected to conform and accept the status quo, which was highly patriarchal and supreme” (p.35). Some studies included in this research reveal that despite ongoing efforts to transform public universities, black women academics still experience the higher education system as alienating, exclusionary, and marginalising. This reflects what the authors describe as the "nervous conditions" (p.170) in public universities, where increased access and the growing presence of women academics coincide with a significant body of literature highlighting the gendered and patriarchal obstacles these women must navigate (Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo, 2023).

Phaswana (2019) discusses their experiences as an outsider within the academic environment to describe their marginalisation as a black African woman in a historically white South African university. The author faced exclusion from teaching postgraduate students,

while less experienced white colleagues were given the opportunity, highlighting racial and gender inequalities in academia. The "nanny phenomenon" (p.169) further describes how black academics are often expected to handle large undergraduate classes without being given the same recognition or opportunities to advance. Additionally, the author and their Zimbabwean colleague experienced alienation due to their radical Africanist views, which colleagues dismissed. Racial and sexist microaggressions from white male colleagues further marginalised the author, and they encountered biased treatment in salary and performance evaluations. These experiences reinforced a sense of being an intruder or space invader in academia. Despite these challenges, the author remained committed to challenging racialised and gendered constructions of blackness, using the classroom as a space for critical pedagogy and advocating for social justice.

Nathane (2019) expresses a long-standing feeling of being an outsider in academia, describing the experience as "sitting on one bum"(p.179). The author felt like a stranger in a space where they struggled to belong, particularly as a first-generation university graduate. Unlike others who come into academia with cultural capital and networks of privilege, the author entered without the support systems that could guide them, for example, in writing their first academic journal article. It often felt like survival of the fittest, with new lecturers facing numerous demands and targets, such as publishing journal articles, on top of teaching and research supervision. The author frequently felt unsure where to begin but hesitated to ask for guidance out of fear of appearing unintelligent. The author's main struggle, however, was internal. Growing up under apartheid, a system that treated the author with contempt and reinforced the idea that they were not good enough, left the author with a heavy burden of internalised self-doubt. Despite the author's father's constant reminders not to believe the negative messages associated with their race, the weight of this internalised limitation persisted throughout the author's academic journey (Nathane, 2019).

Müller (2018) examined innovative methods for critically engaging with educator identity during a time of transformation and decolonisation in higher education, aiming to

reconceptualise these identities by embracing complexity, diversity, and multiplicity. This approach is crucial for understanding social justice, decolonisation, and anti-oppressive education especially in the South African context, where these objectives are closely aligned with broader systemic transformation efforts. Moving beyond theory, Müller highlighted how self-reflexive practices can lead to micro-transformations.

As Nathane (2019) observed, social change begins with the individual, expands to the group, and eventually influences institutions and society. Similarly, Sathorar and Geduld (2019) argued that in times of radical social transformation, altering the curriculum also requires transforming the educator. Sibanda (2021) also emphasised the need to decolonise the mind (as originally coined by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in 1986), and Waghid (2021) advocated for decentring the self. This perspective encourages academics to prioritise the needs and perspectives of others over individual interests, particularly in areas such as language, culture, art, religion, history, geography, literature, and education. By aligning university practices with the aspirations of diverse communities, a more humanising, liberating, and transformative academic experience can emerge.

5.4.3 Sub-Theme 2.3: Mental Health and Well-being of Academics

As Sathorar and Geduld (2019) highlight, neoliberal attacks on higher education institutions have resulted in harmful and detrimental environments. What the institution demands often comes at the expense of the self (Waghid, 2021). Dehumanisation related to the materiality of domination (Maistry & Le Grange, 2023) affects academics' psychosocial well-being and sense of self (Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018). Authors in two of the included studies described this as follows:

“Because this process of trying to make people happy, it's heavily taxing, taxing on me the individual who is doing this.” (Müller, 2018)

“ ‘Level’ mindedness, conservatism, and financial prudence are valued above human well-being, joy, recuperation, experimentation, and local responsiveness.” (Bell et al., 2020)

Findings from the included studies indicate that academics recall often feeling extremely confused, frustrated and wondering if they cause more harm than healing in classrooms (Müller, 2018). Nathane (2019) reflects on how, similar to their childhood experience of feeling like an intruder and remaining silent, the author utilised silence as a means of survival during their initial years in academia. The author describes their experience in higher education as one marked by low self-esteem and a constant sense of inferiority. Black women academics often navigate transitions between universities, with decisions to move influenced by multiple factors, including the unrealistic expectations placed on black African women in advancing to senior roles. The authors found that these moves were driven by self-care and self-preservation, highlighting the importance for black women, who are often focused on caring for others, to prioritise their own well-being (Magoqwana et al., 2019). After earning their PhD, one author chose to join a university with a strong Afrikaans culture and a deeply bureaucratic structure. The author’s decision to leave this institution sparked significant discussion, as it had potential implications for that university’s equity targets. Some colleagues suggested the author was ungrateful for the opportunities they had been given and that their move was motivated purely by financial gain. These remarks left the author feeling like a “runaway slave” (p.14), reinforcing feelings of being undervalued and reduced to a mere statistic in the context of institutional equity goals (Magoqwana et al., 2019). For multiple black women academics from the included studies, their appointments were first seen as a “privilege” and as an opportunity that was “given” to them (Mahabeer et al., 2018, p.34).

Mkhwanazi (2023) reflects on their transition from a historically white, privileged university to a historically disadvantaged one, viewing it as a personal and political act. While some colleagues saw it as a downgrade in academic status, the author regarded it as a vital

act of self-care. The author explains that care is a complex and often unsettling concept, shaped by moral, political, and economic factors and influenced by race, gender, and generational perspectives. Care also varies with time, addressing different needs and perceptions of deservingness at various stages of life. The author's decision to leave was driven by discomfort with how anthropology was being lectured and dissatisfaction with the attitudes of white colleagues toward black students, who were frequently treated as native informants rather than as respected scholars. This experience led the author to resign, underscoring their academic journey's personal and political aspects (Mkhwanazi, 2023).

Phaswana (2019) reflects on their experiences with racialisation and sexualisation, highlighting how black bodies are often expected to remain cheerful despite oppressive circumstances. Others misinterpret this forced cheerfulness as passivity and compliance. In the classroom, the author shares how their identity is questioned not only by white students but also by some black students, leading to a sense of "non-being" (p.171). Women, particularly black women, are frequently seen as voiceless and overly emotional, which often prevents them from fully expressing their emotions, as they feel pressured to conceal their vulnerability (Mahabeer et al., 2018). Feeling overpowered along with a lack of self-worth is often experienced. A study revealed that although academia is perceived as a space where everyone, including women, can freely express themselves, men often dominate discussions in meetings, positioning themselves as the authoritative figures with the final say. The researcher noted that this dynamic went unquestioned, as the tendency to accept male decisions without challenge was deeply ingrained from early socialisation. Family, school, and religion had all played roles in teaching submission and obedience to those in power, particularly men (Mahabeer et al., 2018).

Black women academics included in the studies often face accusations of being oversensitive or paranoid. The findings suggest that the academic environment fails to recognise these individuals as unique, instead reducing them to racialised stereotypes, which leads to feelings of alienation and dismissal (Kiguwa, 2019). The author reflects on

how black individuals are often viewed either as exceptions or as representatives of their entire race. Expressing exhaustion, the author remarks, “I am tired” (p.19), as they recall moments that highlight the challenges of navigating institutional spaces as vulnerable individuals who lack protection. Nathane (2019), in their autoethnography, describes their experience of not belonging, feelings of uncertainty, and the rage the author often experiences over all the “unspoken stuff” (p.180). The author writes about their struggle for survival in academia and how they experienced feeling as if they had some sort of deficit; often recalling feelings of low self-esteem and a sense of inferiority, all while carrying a heavy burden of succeeding in the higher education space.

Matthews (2021), a white female academic, discusses their feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty, expressing a desire to contribute meaningfully to the true decolonisation of higher education, rather than merely alleviating white guilt. The author acknowledges their ongoing uncertainty about how white academics can truly support the decolonisation project. Matthews argues that white academics must work harder to strike a balance between recognising their role in perpetuating the problem and striving to be part of the solution. Participants in Costandius et al.'s (2018) study report experiencing settler anxiety, white guilt, and emotions such as fear, shame, and guilt, which often result in emotional distress and hinder action. Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016) highlight the tension between visible and invisible rules that contribute significantly to ongoing occupational stress, especially in the context of decolonisation and transformation within South African higher education.

Magoqwana et al. (2019) write about how black women academics are often “forced to care” (p.8) or coerced into unpaid roles by pressuring women academics to care for the new customers (the students). The authors recall how they are often placed under surveillance and infantilised. One of the authors writes about how they are overworked, yet often reminded that “she must know her place” (p.14) while also not being recognised as scholars or experts in their field. For new academics in particular, job instability was a factor which led to internal tension and questioning their own worthiness (Daniels et al., 2024). The

effect of being precariously positioned caused negative emotions and a lack of self-confidence which affected academic teaching. For Khunou et al. (2019) writing about their shared feelings of exclusion, despair, failure, belonging, and hope has led to a sense of healing and community.

Employees find their work to be genuinely meaningful when their understanding of their professional identity aligns with the environment in which they operate (Joubert & Clarence, 2024). This alignment fosters a sense of purpose and belonging, enhancing job satisfaction and overall engagement within the workplace. When individuals perceive a congruence between their personal values and the organisational culture, it not only motivates them but also leads to higher levels of productivity and innovation. However, participants in Joubert and Clarence's (2024) study on the connections between precarity and identity for academic literacy developers, stated feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, anxiety and demotivation. One participant stated, "I just feel very dispensable" (p.5).

Psychology often individualises experiences caused by institutional systems by reframing structural problems—such as discrimination, economic inequality, or workplace stress—as personal issues rather than systemic ones. This occurs through mechanisms like pathologising individuals by diagnosing stress, anxiety, and burnout as personal mental health issues, rather than responses to exploitative conditions (Coetzee & De Villiers, 2010). Rosalind (2018) critiques how the neoliberal university individualises systemic problems, framing job insecurity, overwork, and precarity as personal failures rather than structural issues. The author explains how academics internalise these struggles through self-blame, guilt, and shame, while universities offer individualised solutions like resilience training and mindfulness apps that reinforce self-discipline instead of addressing the root causes. The neoliberal model shapes academics' emotions and identities, fostering anxiety, competition, and self-surveillance. Rather than relying on individual coping strategies, Rosalind (2018) advocates for collective solidarity, urging academics to go beyond self-optimisation and

engage in political resistance, strikes, and campaigns to challenge the structural conditions of academia.

An article by Woods et al. (2019) explores how workplace conditions influence mental health, noting that focusing solely on individual psychological factors can obscure the broader structural issues contributing to mental distress. For example, instead of questioning unreasonable workloads in academia, the focus shifts to an individual's inability to cope. Morse et al. (2012) argue that while individual-focused burnout interventions can be beneficial, organisational-level strategies may be more effective in addressing burnout's root causes. Organisational factors—such as excessive workload, role ambiguity, lack of autonomy, and limited social support—are stronger predictors of burnout, making systemic interventions a priority. Resilience training, mindfulness, and cognitive-behavioural strategies place the burden of adaptation on individuals rather than addressing oppressive structures, shifting responsibility away from institutions. This framing also encourages self-blame and internalisation, leading individuals to view exclusion, marginalisation, or failure as personal shortcomings rather than consequences of systemic oppression. Social inequalities, such as racial discrimination and economic precarity, are frequently medicalised or treated as psychological problems, with solutions focused on therapy or self-help rather than collective action or policy change. Mainstream psychology tends to emphasise individual agency over collective change, reinforcing personal responsibility and self-regulation while discouraging systemic critique and activism. Ultimately, psychology often depoliticises structural struggles by translating them into personal difficulties, promoting self-adjustment rather than institutional reform.

Phaswana (2019) wrote of their struggle with authenticity for fear of judgement. Furthermore, the author wrote how they became frustrated with themselves due to some flaws in the author's instruction that led to students not performing according to expectations. Chasi (2019) writes how they were often confronted with "the question of not loving myself enough to seek an easier life" (p. 155) from family and friends. One of the

authors in Bell et al.'s (2020) article describes their decolonial aspirations as arising from a place of deep exhaustion and dejection, feeling a sense of failure when reflecting on their community. Yet, the vision of what could be achieved offers them a glimmer of hope.

5.4.4 Sub-Theme 2.4: Power Dynamics and Relationships

Participants in the included studies argue that in the neoliberal university, the sense of collegiality, voluntary collaboration, and ethic of care has diminished, replaced by a focus on quantifiable outcomes measured through key performance indicators (KPIs). Students are increasingly treated as clients, and teaching is structured around a demand-driven curriculum, prioritising market needs over educational values (Magoqwana et al., 2019). The discussion on quantifiable outcomes relates to the article by Peseta et al. (2017) which highlights the pervasive culture of measurement in academia, which reduces complex academic work to quantifiable metrics and often overlooks its nuanced nature. Political shifts have added new challenges for universities, particularly regarding the value of expertise. The pressure of performance metrics has personal and professional costs, contributing to stress and burnout among academics. Tensions also arise from the conflict between Western measures of success and efforts to integrate indigenous knowledge into the curriculum.

Nathane (2019) observes that higher education institutions are inherently hierarchical, reflecting the power dynamics and racial structures present in broader South African society. The author describes the academic environment as frequently unwelcoming, with deeply ingrained practices that contradict formal university policies. Although institutional policies at the macro level align with the non-discriminatory ideals of South Africa's Constitution, real power rests with certain influential individuals. These individuals, informally referred to as the "Big Five" (p.192) hold positions across various structures of the institution and act as gatekeepers. They create exclusive zones of comfort for select groups based on unstated criteria, forming a pact that works to exclude others from opportunities within the academic space (Nathane, 2019).

Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo (2023) found that black women academics in their study experienced subtle and pervasive gender-based harassment, particularly through mentoring relationships with male colleagues. Several participants reported feeling uneasy with how male mentors interacted with them, including inappropriate physical contact and intrusive monitoring of their behaviour on campus. One academic shared their ongoing discomfort with their male mentors, which underscored the intersectional complexities of mentoring as a potential space for power imbalances, harassment, discrimination, and abuse. This experience led the academic to an existential crisis, as they questioned the validity of their feelings and feared the potential repercussions of reporting their discomfort to the university.

Some autoethnographies indicate the efforts of lecturers to challenge the power dynamics which exist in classroom contexts. Lecturers explain how they teach their students to question their lecturers, themselves and others. Students need to view themselves as questors for knowledge rather than vessels suitable for receiving knowledge. Chasi (2019) emphasises how students and lecturers should have a shared role and to ask questions together, thereby bringing unique knowledge and perspectives to understand what is being learned. Garusta (2023) recognises that classrooms are inherently political spaces, shaped by dynamics of privilege and oppression that influence individual needs, desires, and interests. In response, the author makes deliberate efforts to reshape their relationship with students. Through the application of feminist pedagogy, the author seeks to create educational experiences that are more democratic, participatory, and empowering, aimed at challenging traditional power structures and advancing social justice. In this approach, voice becomes the currency within academia, and Garusta provides students with opportunities to contribute questions, comments, and input into curricula, assessments, and teaching practices without fear of causing offense. The author emphasises creating a platform that is both nurturing and critical, allowing for the dismantling of conventional hierarchies between students and instructors. While this does not completely eliminate power imbalances, it signals progress towards a more socially just and democratic classroom environment.

5.4.5 Sub-Theme 2.5: New Academics and Experiences of Precarity in Academia

The term emergent academics typically refers to individuals in the initial five years following the completion of their PhD. It can also describe those who are new to academia, having completed their master's degree and are currently pursuing their PhD (Hlatshwayo & Majozi, 2024). *New academics* (p.40) can be defined as precariously employed, part-time staff, often students themselves, who are paid on a claim basis and have not yet secured permanent positions (Daniels et al., 2024). Precarious employment is widespread in academia, with lecturers, tutors, and support staff on temporary or fixed-term contracts. This instability leads to high staff turnover, diminishing both their professional credibility and capacity, which may negatively affect student outcomes. Additionally, precarious employment challenges the development of professional identity and legitimacy within their roles, departments, and the broader university environment (Joubert & Clarence, 2024).

The meanings associated with becoming or being an academic are continually evolving due to various influences on universities. By creatively engaging with narratives through poetry, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016) uncovered new possibilities for navigating the complexities of academia emphasising the importance of collegial relationships in fostering self-belief and resourcefulness among academics. Furthermore, it highlights how both novice and experienced scholars can serve as valuable sources of support and learning for one another through collaborative engagement (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016).

Go forward together

Overwhelmed, scattered

Vulnerable and exposed

Have to find your way

To go forward together

The self becomes the resource

The opening lines of the Tanka poem encapsulate the tensions observed in academics' narratives regarding their experiences in academia. Findings from Pithouse-Morgan et al.'s (2016) study suggest a notable disparity between the expectations of academic careers and the actual experiences encountered, indicating that new academics often enter the field without a clear understanding of its demands. This gap is frequently exacerbated by a "sink-or-swim philosophy" (p.14), where the early career phase is viewed as a rite of passage, implying that those who cannot thrive independently may lack the necessary talent for academic success. Access to key resources, such as research grants, conference funding, and teaching materials, can be uneven and impacted by the low status of early-career academics, their lack of familiarity with navigating these resources, or their limited experience in competitive academic environments. Additionally, new academics, often lacking a robust publication record, frequently carry heavy teaching loads, making it difficult to balance teaching and research, which is critical for career progression. These challenges, along with the absence of effective coping strategies, can lead to increased feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and inadequacy among early-career academics (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016). The findings from Daniels et al.'s (2024) study indicated that it is often expected of new academics to also be the driving force behind social transformation and institutional change.

Findings indicate that early-career academics often resort to ad-hoc coping strategies, such as teaching defensively, due to a lack of adequate support. Without a conscious awareness of their behaviour in the classroom, these new educators may inadvertently replicate the teaching styles of their own instructors, which may not effectively address the diverse needs of contemporary students. This tendency can hinder the development of transformative institutional cultures. For early-career academics, mentorship from seasoned colleagues proves crucial for navigating the complexities of academia, reinforcing the importance of seeking tailored support. However, the current corporatisation

of academia can undermine collaboration, framing institutions as competitors rather than allies (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016).

The hierarchical structure of South African academia, largely driven by academic achievements and supervisory recognition, perpetuates considerable inequalities in how early-career academics are treated. This management style often fosters a culture of infantilisation and ageism, particularly targeting young, black academics. For instance, one author recounted being asked to engage in youthful exercises to promote the department, as incoming students were assumed to relate better to them due to their age. Beyond race and gender, the author also faced age-based discrimination. While creating age-appropriate and welcoming spaces for students is essential, such efforts are frequently unacknowledged or unrewarded. Young black women academics often experience infantilisation and surveillance under the guise of guidance and development, implying they are not trusted to manage tasks independently, especially in comparison to their male counterparts. Despite their presence being seen as a sign of transformation within South African academia, these women continue to confront sexism and ageism in their professional environments (Magoqwana et al., 2019).

Findings from a study conducted by Joubert and Clarence (2024) on exploring the connections between precarity and identity for academic literacy developers highlight that the predominant experience of precarity among new academics is one of uncertainty and insecurity, often resulting in anxiety and demotivation. This uncertainty stems from an inability to plan for the future or establish a stable career path, leading to a sense of powerlessness and a feeling of not belonging. Participants from the study expressed feelings of being dispensable and merely filling a functional role. The sense of meaningful work is closely tied to alignment between one's professional identity and the work context, which precarious employment often fails to provide. As one participant commented, "We're just sort of filling a role and fulfilling a service that needs to be done" (Joubert & Clarence, p.5). The effects of precarity on academics' careers were evident in how it hindered their professional

development and progression. This occurred in two ways: first, due to a lack of institutional investment in their growth, and second, because academics themselves were less likely to invest in their own development. The sense of not belonging diminished their motivation and opportunities to advance professionally (Joubert & Clarence, 2024).

Daniels et al. (2024) reveal through collective reflection that experiences of precarity foster feelings of displacement and estrangement. These conditions disrupt a stable sense of identity and perpetuate colonial patterns of behaviour and existence. Perceived powerlessness and vulnerability were found to create pressure to conform. Students working in casual roles often fill in for permanent staff when they cannot fulfil their duties. Serving as substitutes, combined with the temporary nature of their contracts, heightens feelings of displacement and estrangement. This is reflected in their emotional experience of being caught between roles—neither fully staff nor fully students. They feel distanced from the ideal educators they aspire to become. One academic expressed this by stating, "I leave feeling used and discarded, with my passion for teaching dashed" (p.50). Moreover, the shift in contractual agreements altered the academic's relationships with the department, peers, supervisors, and colleagues, making it hard for her to articulate her emotions or ask for help. These mixed emotions leave her feeling grateful for the opportunity but also plagued by self-doubt, leading her to constantly question her abilities. Informal networks, such as corridor talk often provide much needed spaces and information to new academics to help them equip themselves to survive in academia (Daniels et al., 2024).

During Nathane's (2019) probation period, the author exercised their reproductive rights and became a mother, a decision that was essential for them at that stage in life. However, becoming pregnant while on probation was frowned upon, with an unspoken but clear disapproval: "You are given an opportunity to be in this prestigious place, and you fall pregnant!?" (p.190) Despite this, the author took pride in their excellent teaching evaluations and strong service record, which reflected their dedication as an educator. However, during a probation meeting, the author was told that their excellent teaching evaluations held little

weight, as they were considered subjective and unreliable. This felt like a harsh blow and a rude awakening. The author had always believed that teaching was the core function of a university, but the meeting revealed otherwise. They were informed that publishing journal articles was the true measure of an academic's value, not student feedback on teaching. This realisation highlighted the stark contrast between the institution's stated commitment to teaching and the actual emphasis placed on publishing as the primary indicator of worth (Nathane, 2019).

Casualisation and precarity can hinder students, whose goal is merely survival, employed on contract from securing permanent positions. While teaching and learning are at the core of the institution's values, its actual value diminishes when compensated on an hourly basis. Short-term contracts, which are essential to the university's teaching operations, are often filled by students. Postgraduate students, viewed as a disposable workforce, face significant pay disparities and unstable job prospects which in turn reproduces colonial modes of being, doing and knowing (Daniels et al., 2024). Furthermore, Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo (2023), in their study about the complex experiences of black women academics in a research-intensive university in South Africa, found that several participants had not originally planned to become academics. Frustration with the basic education system led them to seek employment outside of schooling, and many ended up in academia by chance, ultimately choosing to remain. As one academic expressed, "I just happened to land in academia by chance or default" (p.175). This highlights how black academics often entered or stayed in higher education through roles as students or part-time contract staff. One academic expressed feeling as though they were still in the process of becoming an academic, illustrating the concept of an emergent academic. This reflects the challenges that women academics must navigate and negotiate as they work to establish their identities and find their place within the university.

These experiences of precarity, particularly in the context of South African academia, highlight a drive toward decolonisation by calling attention to how colonial legacies of

marginalisation, inequality, and exploitation persist in the academic environment. The pressures faced by new academics, especially those from marginalised groups, underscore the need for structural reform within academia to address these historical inequities and create more inclusive, equitable spaces for academics.

5.5 Theme 3: Perceived Barriers to Decolonisation as Experienced by Social Science Academics

This theme consists of three subthemes. The first subtheme focuses on institutional resistance, the second subtheme is about Eurocentrism in knowledge production and the third subtheme is on balancing role conflicts in academia as experienced by academics as perceived barriers to decolonisation

5.5.1 Sub-Theme 3.1: Institutional Resistance

Despite positive attitudes, some lecturers encountered obstacles, including students' preferences for traditional teaching methods, institutional constraints (like rigid curricula and timetables), and uncertainty about how to implement decolonisation effectively. As one of Sathorar and Geduld's participants notes, "many students do not appreciate my problem-posing approach and enquiring methods. They prefer a more direct, transmission style as they do not want to think and reflect on their thinking and understanding of what we grapple with in the classroom. They find self-discovery and engaging in discussions daunting, and I literally have to force them to participate" (p.118). Participants in the included studies emphasised the need for supportive institutional environments that encourage open discussions on complex topics and provide exposure to expert knowledge. There was a strong desire for more flexibility in academic structures to facilitate the decolonisation process, allowing lecturers to connect classroom learning to students' lived experiences (Sathorar & Geduld, 2019).

Mkhwanazi (2023) observed that after the student protests subsided, the university largely reverted to business as usual. While a few works by black, predominantly non-South

African scholars, were incorporated into the anthropology curriculum, efforts to diversify the largely white Anthropology Department by hiring more black academic staff faced resistance from faculty members. The author expressed feelings of betrayal and deep disappointment, having expected anthropologists to be more attuned to the importance of addressing the department's gender and racial imbalances. One academic in Bell et al.'s (2020) study argued that the colonial character still present at their university persists because decolonisation efforts are viewed as "a drop in standards" (p.852) within an institution grounded in the logic of exploitative economic models. Some participants from Costandius et al. (2018) questioned whether decolonisation would move South Africa back and deeper into being a "Third World country" (p.77). The authors observed how this fear is connected to an unwillingness to engage in decolonisation as it will dislodge power structures from which these academics have greatly benefited (Costandius et al., 2018).

Despite policies aimed at promoting transformation, the findings suggest that institutional culture continues to favour uniformity and reinforces a narrow definition of academic identity and traditional nuclear family structures. This limits the recognition of diverse identities and the extra responsibilities that "black tax²" (p.52) places on black individuals. Such practices deepen existing social inequalities and restrict opportunities for academic advancement (Daniels et al., 2024). As the author notes, "despite policy imperatives towards transformation, we found that institutional culture privileges homogeneity and perpetuates a singular notion of academic selves and nuclear family forms. This negates the opportunity to acknowledge multiple identities and the additional responsibilities that black tax imposes on black individuals. Existing social inequalities are exacerbated by such practices that limit opportunities for academic advancement" (p.53).

² Black Tax refers to the financial contributions made by black South Africans, particularly those in the emerging middle class, to support their economically disadvantaged families, both direct and extended. It can be understood as a form of intra-family financial support that links the more affluent members of the community with those still facing economic challenges.

University departments face significant capacity challenges due to reduced staff numbers and increasing student enrolments, exacerbated by budget cuts. These financial constraints have negatively impacted departmental operations, leading to heavy teaching loads and minimal administrative support. As a result, personal development goals for academics are often side-lined, with teaching becoming the primary focus. Black African academics, in particular, experience a persistent "juniorisation" (p.13) of their roles, as there is little institutional commitment to effective mentoring programmes that would support their academic progression and growth. Universities and departments show little genuine commitment to the development and retention of black women academics, with transformation initiatives often being superficial and implemented only to meet policy requirements. As one participant notes, "even though I already had a PhD, my intellectual contributions were not valued. Often I was made to feel like an outsider, in a department with academics who have occupied the space for much longer and therefore 'earned' the right to make decisions" (Magoqwana et al., 2019, p.14). True transformation, the findings argue, is not just about increasing the presence of black African academics but also about fundamentally changing exclusionary departmental cultures and establishing systematic, intentional processes to support the development of these scholars (Magoqwana et al., 2019).

Senekal and Lenz's (2020) study on the challenges of decolonising the South African higher education curriculum found that participants viewed time as a major obstacle in adopting a new curriculum. They expressed concerns about the time needed to shift from a Eurocentric educational model to one that integrates both indigenous and global theories and sciences. They articulated that "colonisation did not happen overnight, and neither will it be undone quickly" (p.155). One academic even remarked that changing the tertiary education system might be nearly impossible. In response to these concerns, the researchers assert that institutions resistant to change will find excuses, whereas those committed to genuine transformation will seek ways to implement it. They argue that

decolonisation is feasible and does not have to be a lengthy process (Senekal & Lenz, 2020).

Waghid (2021) found that a university that does not promote cosmopolitan ideals risks remaining insular, ignoring crucial aspects of diversity, autonomy, and the need for transformation. It is essential for a university to engage with differences, dissent, and creativity; failing to recognise what it means to be other, diverse, and heterogeneous limits its effectiveness. Additionally, an institution that maintains a culture of compliance reduces students to mere recipients of information, undermining their potential for active engagement. Adhering to the uniform practices of the global North does little to advance the decolonisation of higher education initiatives on the continent. Therefore, there is an urgent need to continuously pursue the decolonisation of African universities (Waghid, 2021).

5.5.2 Sub-Theme 3.2: Eurocentrism in Knowledge Production

When an African university is viewed solely through the lens of its economic, commodified, and monetised value, it becomes essential to rethink the need for decolonisation. As Waghid (2021) writes, “the marketised university has largely contributed to the schism between teaching-learning and research, and hence, the decolonised university of teaching-learning-research remains in waiting”(p.3) If students pursue higher education primarily for social mobility, competition, and global market participation, it indicates a deeper issue in their approach. Moreover, if African universities continue to prioritise competition, rankings, and the commodification of knowledge, the need for decolonisation becomes even more urgent. The focus of higher education in Africa must move beyond market forces and meritocratic ideals (Waghid, 2021).

Phaswana (2019) reflects on the deep, personal struggle of being a black academic, questioning whether black individuals, historically treated as non-beings, can produce valid knowledge. As the author writes, “in comparison to the core ‘beings’ at this university I was that ‘non-being’ who was even struggling to pronounce certain words”(174). This struggle

was especially pronounced during the author's PhD in the UK, where the author's experiences from South Africa were often dismissed as narrow and subjective, reinforcing a bias toward Western perspectives and academic frameworks. The author learned that black individuals are often erased or marginalised in academic spaces, their voices misinterpreted or silenced. This epistemic privilege reinforces the inferior status of knowledge produced by black academics. The author describes the tension between being required to think universally and objectively—which often meant adhering to Western theoretical frameworks—and their desire to ground their work in the realities of their South African context. The author criticises the tendency of scholars, including black and progressive ones in South Africa, to focus primarily on black lives for research, while rarely studying white subjects. This over-researching of black people, rooted in apartheid-era focus, leads the author to resist engaging in this type of work for mere academic currency. This epistemic dominance forces African scholars to seek validation from Western institutions and publish in international journals to maintain academic credibility, perpetuating the cycle of colonial influence. The author shares how, during their PhD, they felt compelled to subscribe to white theoretical frameworks, despite wanting to pursue alternative approaches. This was seen as playing the game to ensure completion of the author's degree, revealing how academic structures often force scholars from marginalised communities to compromise their intellectual freedom in order to succeed.

Frizelle (2019) reflects on multiple instances where black students have confronted the author regarding aspects of their teaching that relate to their whiteness. This prompted the author to engage deeply with literature and familiarise themselves with the work of various African academics. In reflecting on another experience, the author recognised that, as a white individual, they had the privilege of observing history with a degree of emotional detachment. The author acknowledged that they had not considered or anticipated how their black students might react to representations of black South Africans through a colonial and apartheid perspective. One author (Brunsdon, 2019) wrote how during earlier years of their

academic career, they were never against other knowledge systems, nor were they actively attempting to discredit it, but by simply being oblivious, they were aiding the survival of colonial knowledge systems.

The findings reveal a strong consensus among respondents regarding the need for decolonisation in higher education, with most expressing dissatisfaction with the current Eurocentric educational framework. Key terms like "Eurocentric" and "Western" were frequently used to describe the prevailing educational system, which contrasts sharply with the diverse backgrounds of the student body. Participants in the included studies identified several factors contributing to this misalignment, including the assumption of a universal curriculum, the university's focus on conforming to external benchmarks, and a belief that Western knowledge is the sole truth. They articulated the necessity for redress through contextualising and localising the curriculum to reflect students' realities, dismantling the perceived dominance of Western knowledge, and integrating marginalised indigenous knowledge into mainstream education. The emphasis on knowledge and truth emerged as central themes in the decolonisation discussion. While some participants in the included studies called for a more rigorous and engaging curriculum, their rationale did not necessarily align with the principles of decolonisation. A significant argument made by participants in the included studies was the need to incorporate previously marginalised indigenous knowledge from Africa, realigning the university's focus to better meet the needs of its students. However, one academic maintained that decolonisation might lead to a narrower focus, potentially making students less competitive on a global scale. Despite this dissenting view, participants in the included studies recognised the rationale for decolonisation and expressed a desire for further discussion on what aspects of the curriculum should be targeted for change (Sibanda, 2021).

In Hlatshwayo and Alexander's (2021) study, which explored academics' perspectives on decolonising curricula in South African higher education, participants stressed the importance of re-centring African epistemic traditions in academic curricula.

Participants expressed that merely dismantling Eurocentric curricula and its colonial viewpoint was not enough. One of the participants specifically pointed out the necessity for an "epistemic and ontological separation" (p.52), explaining that they had to distance themselves from their indigenous knowledge systems—knowledge systems that were neither acknowledged nor valued in South African education—in order to navigate and succeed at university. The same participant noted a conflict between their personal and educational worldviews, stating, "my personal world views and my educational views were not meeting each other" (p.52). Additionally, other participants observed that the traditional cultural capital they grew up with did not correspond with the values promoted by the university, leading to further tensions.

The participants in Senekal and Lenz's (2020) study acknowledge that a major obstacle to the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa is not only the content of the curriculum but also the methods of instruction used. They noted that the existing body of knowledge produced in Africa is insufficient to compete globally or to inspire the continent's people. The participants in the included studies echoed existing literature, agreeing that South Africa's higher education system continues to prioritise Western knowledge and rationality, often marginalising non-Western ways of knowing. This situation reflects the historical imbalance between colonisers and the colonised, wherein the colonising culture was deemed superior, relegating indigenous cultures to the periphery.

The findings from Senekal and Lenz (2020) reveal that the perceived superiority of Western knowledge poses a significant challenge to curriculum transformation. One academic pointed out that stakeholders, including students' parents, view Eurocentric qualifications from Western institutions as desirable, believing they enhance their children's global opportunities. Another academic cautioned that decolonising higher education could limit students' perspectives, suggesting it might confine them to a narrow worldview: "It will confine them to the proverbial box that we have been trying our whole careers to make them think out of" (p.156). These perspectives suggest that some believe a purely Afrocentric

curriculum could dilute content quality and meaning, with an implication that it would render them intellectually inferior. One interviewee remarked that “what works in Africa does not work in the rest of the world” (p.156), indicating a fear that decolonising the curriculum would mean excluding all non-African knowledge. This notion was echoed by another participant, who asserted that for decolonised education to be effectively introduced, the existing system must be dismantled, allowing those it serves to define it themselves. The researchers view this mindset as potentially dangerous.

Moreover, the lack of theoretical and evidence-based research within the African context hinders efforts to transform a colonial and Eurocentric curriculum. Senekal and Lenz (2020) contend that there is not enough developed African content available to substitute Western education without resulting in a gap in knowledge. Consequently, the authors advocate for curricula that incorporate the best knowledge, skills, ethics, and traditions from across the globe, highlighting the importance of cross-cultural collaboration. This new curriculum should integrate diverse perspectives, allowing figures like Freud and Fanon to coexist. The aim of decolonisation should not be to eliminate Western knowledge but to decentre it, recover African cultures, histories, and languages, and use these to inform a more inclusive future. In essence, the decolonisation of the curriculum should begin with familiar African knowledge while also incorporating global perspectives, ultimately fostering a balanced and enriched educational framework (Senekal & Lenz, 2020).

A recurring theme from Mashiyi et al. (2020) was the rejection of Eurocentric, hegemonic knowledge in favour of home-grown African knowledge, with participants in their study advocating for *epistemic disobedience* (p.150) as essential to successful decolonisation. Respondents saw themselves as agents of change, working towards privileging African-centred knowledge and promoting curricula that foster critical thinking, reflection, and a sense of belonging (Mashiyi et al., 2020). As Brunson (2019) states, it is vitally important to move selflessly forward by becoming epistemologically open-minded.

In addressing the counterarguments against decolonisation, particularly those rooted in neoliberal demands such as international competitiveness, social mobility, and market participation, it is essential to critically examine the tension between these demands and the need for decolonisation in African higher education. While some academics argue that decolonising the curriculum might limit students' global competitiveness or narrow their perspectives, this view overlooks the broader purpose of education, which is to empower students with knowledge that is not only globally relevant but also deeply connected to their local realities. To foreground decolonisation more effectively, it is crucial to integrate these counter-narratives by reframing the discussion around the potential for African universities to contribute to global knowledge in ways that reflect local contexts, histories, and epistemologies. Rather than viewing decolonisation as an exclusion of global knowledge, it should be seen as an opportunity to decentre Western hegemony and create a more inclusive educational system that prepares students to engage in global conversations from a position of strength, rooted in their own identities and histories. As highlighted by Senekal and Lenz (2020), the aim should not be to reject Western knowledge but to balance it with African perspectives, creating an enriched framework that fosters critical thinking, intellectual autonomy, and a deeper sense of belonging. By addressing the fears that decolonisation may limit students' global competitiveness, we can shift the focus to the importance of nurturing students' ability to think critically across cultures, contributing to a more diverse and equitable global knowledge economy.

5.5.3 Sub-Theme 3.3: *Balancing Role Conflicts in Academia*

Magoqwana et al. (2019) argue that global capitalism, through the entrenchment of neoliberal cultures, is reshaping higher education institutions by restructuring academic labour into a quantifiable assembly line that demands increased output with fewer resources. Alongside traditional research responsibilities, many administrative tasks have been shifted onto teaching faculty, resulting in the performance of invisible labour. The authors highlight how the corporatisation of universities exacerbates these pressures, as revealed through

their biographical experiences. In addition to the unspoken expectations of serving as role models for students and colleagues, black African women academics face moral pressure to take on care work, a role often linked to stereotypical social and cultural norms. This type of labour, which mirrors the domestic responsibilities historically assigned to black African women, remains unacknowledged and unpaid within the university framework. It is excluded from performance evaluations and offers no concrete benefits for academic advancement or prestigious recognition. Authors such as Bell et al. (2020) identify as activist scholars who recognise that to be true to themselves, it is required of them to bring their personal histories into their work. As one author stated in their autoethnography, activism in academia does not pay and is quite often punished.

Nathane (2019) highlights that within the group of black women entering academia, there is a distinct subset of first-generation graduates whose families lack a tradition of higher education. Their academic paths are significantly shaped by the legacy of the Bantu education system, which left black Africans from previously segregated schools with limited opportunities. This cohort faces numerous challenges, including difficulties in navigating an often alienating and antagonistic academic system, as well as pressures to meet publishing targets set by universities. Failure to achieve these targets is frequently perceived as an individual shortcoming rather than a systemic issue. The author recounts their own experiences of struggling to meet probation targets in their initial years as an academic, which included expectations to publish, enrol in a PhD programme, manage a full teaching workload, supervise research, and handle administrative responsibilities. Additionally, the time required to adapt to teaching methods and develop innovative assessments for students from diverse and unequal backgrounds—shaped by historical oppression—was often overlooked.

Emerging academics are required to actively navigate various spaces to meet the high expectations placed upon them. Mahabeer et al. (2018) found that new academics often lacked adequate mentorship and guidance regarding key aspects of academic life. The

authors suggested that mentorship from more experienced academics could offer crucial support, helping newcomers identify their strengths and weaknesses while assisting them in balancing their personal and professional obligations. One academic expressed feeling overwhelmed, describing the experience as being "thrown into the deep end with no life-jacket for support." As one of the authors in the included studies described this as follows:

"I am busy with a juggling act. I am trying to make the world better, but I have to juggle all these things: relationships, friendships, work, studies..." (Müller, 2018, p.98)

5.6 Theme 4: Strategies Employed by Academics for Decolonisation

This theme is divided into two subthemes: curriculum and pedagogical reforms, and collaboration and community building. Curriculum and pedagogical reforms considers examples of decolonial pedagogies and curricula aimed at disrupting traditional knowledge hierarchies as implemented by academics. Collaboration and community building focuses on collaborative efforts by academics by looking at community-based or interdisciplinary approaches to higher education institutions.

5.6.1 Sub-Theme 4.1: Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms

Some lecturers reported using participatory teaching methods, such as Socratic dialogue and critical reading, to engage students in the learning process, highlighting the importance of collaboration and mutual respect (Sathorar & Geduld, 2019). One participant from the authors' study stated "I provide my students with provocative text and encourage them to read for meaning by looking for the literal meaning, inferential meaning and the personal meaning. It is the personal meaning that allows them to interact with the text and to ask questions. It is during this process that student voice comes out and where lived experiences are shared" (p.118). Garusta (2023), a young black woman, grounds their teaching approach in transformation and inclusivity. The author incorporates their personal experiences to explain theories and the praxis of gender, race, and sexuality, creating a

relational learning environment where students gain deeper insight into their identity. This approach also encourages students to draw from their own experiences and positionalities, promoting critical consciousness in the classroom. The lecturer acknowledges their initial struggle with vulnerability but embraces their positionality as reflexive, viewing the teaching and learning context as a site of ongoing challenge. The author emphasises the importance of emotional authenticity, which allows educators to self-critique, reflect, and assess their pedagogical practices more effectively.

In a study on the third-year English as a second language curriculum for pre-service teachers, Livingston (2018) discovered that engaging critically with cultural metaphors in fairy tales promoted the growth of Afrocentric cultural capital, grounded in the language and traditions of the authors' cultural backgrounds.

Many of the fairy tale characters were relocated in urban township environments and tales of suffering and hardship came to the fore. Themba and Gobisa (“Hansel and Gretel”) live in Soweto but many of the fairy tale characters found homes in the localities of Cape Town. Sleeping Beauty grew up in rich suburbia, and some princesses found themselves transplanted in the beautiful Bo-Kaap. Gerrida (“The Little Mermaid”) frolics in the waves at Hermanus and Little Red Riding Doek (“Little Red Riding Hood”) resides in Fort Beaufort today. Depictions of Ndanji (“Cinderella”) in particular were evident and she can be found living in varied settings, from Simon’s Town, and the city centre to the gang-infested areas of Athlone.

(Livingston, 2018, p.6)

Through qualitative analysis of pre-service teachers’ retellings of traditional fairy tales, it was observed that participants were able to draw from their cultural backgrounds and successfully represent their cultures in their rewrites. However, a notable concern emerged: while some students engaged deeply with cultural metaphors, others relied on established Eurocentric conventions, resulting in a more superficial understanding. The

effectiveness of the exercise was contingent upon the level of critical engagement demonstrated by the students; without this engagement, their retellings tended to be stereotypical.

Phaswana (2019) advocates for exposing black students to diverse knowledge systems rather than the dominant universal knowledge that often reinforces existing power structures. The author believes that true universalism can only be achieved when all knowledge systems, including progressive elements of Euro-American thought, are integrated. Currently, the author promotes *Afro-decoloniality* (p.175), a theory blending decolonial epistemic paradigms, Africology, Africanity, and Afrocentricity. This approach fosters a liberating and validating learning environment for individuals who have been epistemically marginalised. The encouraging feedback from students and colleagues, including through the Young African Leaders Initiative, reinforces their dedication to an alternative epistemology and a new vision of humanity. In their autoethnography, Chasi (2019) highlights the significance of establishing safe spaces for students.

In South Africa, I think that this may be particularly significant because of the ways in which the pursuit of safety amidst fears of crime has occasioned the recreation of cities creased with high walls and constrained movements...Each opening of doors is a powerful yet simple act against apartheid legacies! In South Africa it is important that lecturers make their offices safe spaces by paradoxically countering apartheid.

(Chasi, 2019, p.150)

Chasi (2019) emphasises the importance of working with transparency both by allowing their students to reflect on their own progress as well as actively ensuring their students feel safe to approach them. The author reflects how important it is for students to see them as approachable and to feel safe as a black man in a society where black men are over-represented as sexual predators and dangerous. The author further believes that when

lecturers make their office safe spaces, it is a paradoxically way of countering apartheid. The findings highlight the value of winning the trust of students, as positive student outcomes have affirmed that it allows for outstanding results even in compromised or complex settings.

Morreira et al.'s (2020) study on pedagogic innovation in undergraduate social science teaching highlights that the concept of emplacement, this approach challenges Western epistemic traditions, which separate the knower from the known, by situating students as knowledge producers within specific local contexts. The findings emphasise the need to incorporate multiple cosmologies and worldviews, taking inspiration from personal stories and Africa's creative imagination. The curricula examples presented involve working with both texts and real-world material heritage, enabling students and academics to engage reflexively with disciplinary histories and to create personal, imaginative narratives. However, engaging with place and materiality also means confronting violent colonial histories. Decolonial work requires network thinking to reveal the connections between material culture, like monuments, and the broader epistemological and political histories they represent. this approach fosters decolonial pedagogy in two key ways: (1) it provides students with an embodied, rather than abstracted, method of studying social sciences, and (2) it creates opportunities for students to engage critically with power. By focusing on materiality, space, and place, this pedagogy relativises inherited worldviews of the Global South, centres perspectives from within the region, and positions students as active, embodied knowledge-makers within their communities. This decolonial move encourages students and staff to work reflexively, ensuring that knowledge is not passively received but actively created within their specific social, economic, and political contexts; working towards transforming African universities into "pluriversities" (Morreira et al. 2020, p.150).

Findings from Garusta (2023) suggest that to challenge traditional classroom dynamics, lecturers must employ strategies that promote inclusion, equity, social justice, and equality. Such strategies may include practices like reflexive journaling, negotiation, active listening, dialogue, and mutual vulnerability, all aimed at disrupting conventional power

relations in higher education institutions. The author promotes the application of feminist pedagogy to challenge unequal power dynamics and discriminatory educational environments. This can be accomplished by dismantling hierarchical structures within the classroom, allowing both lecturers and students to engage in a dialogue where everyone is heard and valued, thereby encouraging pluralism and fostering more inclusive learning spaces (Garusta, 2023).

Kgari-Masondo (2020) emphasises the integration of indigenous knowledge as a critical framework in teaching History, linking it to essential historical concepts like cause and consequence, change and continuity, historical significance, gender, environment, race, and the distinction between official and unofficial histories. By incorporating diverse perspectives from Indian, White, African, and Coloured worldviews, the author creates an inclusive learning environment where students can thrive by engaging with histories that resonate with their cultural backgrounds. The author stresses that effective teaching should focus on the outcomes students are expected to achieve and provide the necessary support to help them reach those goals. There is an increasing call for the "re-languaging" (p. 15) of History content, urging educators to adopt a border-crossing pedagogy (p. 15) that blends indigenous and Western knowledge systems. This approach respects and values all forms of knowledge and culture, promoting a more inclusive and comprehensive educational experience (Kgari-Masondo, 2020).

Kiguwa and Segalo (2018) assert that examining the psycho-biographies of staff is as crucial to the decolonisation effort as the curriculum itself. Faculty members must critically reflect on their own identities as raced, classed, and gendered individuals, both within the institution and beyond. This self-awareness influences decisions regarding content selection, presentation, and packaging of teaching materials. Additionally, understanding the socio-historical context of the discipline (Psychology), along with its worldviews and philosophical foundations, is essential to shaping individual perspectives and self-conceptions within the broader world. The authors propose a decolonised approach to Psychology that incorporates

alternative epistemologies, particularly African Psychology, which emphasises collective understanding of mental health within pre-colonial and post-colonial contexts. They advocate for integrating these perspectives into curriculum and teaching practices, highlighting the discipline's political implications in South Africa's history, especially its role in apartheid. By reconceptualising language as both a psychological and political tool, they promote *translanguaging* (p.316) in the classroom, allowing multilingual expression. Furthermore, they support a pluriversal approach to knowledge, which values local knowledge and encourages dialogue among diverse ways of understanding the world (Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018).

5.6.2 Sub-Theme 4.2: Collaboration and Community Building

Participants in Costandius et al.'s study (2018) emphasised the need for collaboration between educators, students, and communities to create a balanced curriculum that integrates both Afrocentric and Eurocentric knowledge, with a focus on cultural relevance. Ubuntu, as a philosophy of togetherness and shared accountability, was identified as central to this process. The participants acknowledged that decolonising the curriculum is a gradual process, requiring ongoing dialogue and collective effort. Additionally, the findings underscored the systemic barriers and biases within academia that limit the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, with participants in the included studies advocating for a more collaborative, culturally inclusive, and transformative approach to teaching and curriculum development. The study also prompted the researchers to reflect on their own biases and recognise the value of cooperation in shaping a more inclusive curriculum.

Morreira (2018) highlights efforts by academics, including the author, to address the high failure rates and academic exclusion of previously disadvantaged students through pedagogical and curricular changes. In collaboration with colleagues from three South African universities, the author participated in a multidisciplinary research project examining humanities courses that intentionally disrupt traditional knowledge hierarchies. These courses incorporated content and methods that focus on the African experience, such as

postcolonial theory, the deconstruction of dominant worldviews, and the use of African examples and languages in teaching. Rather than advocating for a return to pure indigenous knowledge, the project embraced the complex, interconnected nature of knowledge forms in postcolonial Africa and recognised multiple forms of knowledge as legitimate. The study reveals that the activist academics are not isolated in their efforts. The author, along with their colleagues, has observed similar initiatives across the country where traditional knowledge hierarchies are being challenged from within various academic spaces. (Morreira, 2018)

The results of Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo's (2023) study emphasised the significant impact of both formal and informal networks, as well as mentorship, in assisting black women academics with their sense of belonging and success within universities. For the academics in their study, mentorship, often from other black academics, was crucial in helping them navigate and thrive in academia. Mentors provided vital support to early-career black women academics, who commonly faced substantial challenges, including heavy teaching responsibilities, pressure to publish due to neoliberal expectations, launching community engagement initiatives, and effectively supervising postgraduate students.

Kiguwa (2019) emphasises the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and home for black academics and students within higher education. The author argues that black academics must take responsibility for building this sense of belonging by actively acknowledging their own capacity to do so. This can be achieved through peer mentorship, both within and beyond their institutions, and by fostering research collaborations across institutions among black academic staff, thus creating supportive networks and spaces. Furthermore, without institutional recognition for fostering collegial relationships, efforts to support early-career academics may falter. Overall, fostering collegial relationships, along with providing opportunities for professional development, is essential for cultivating self-resourcefulness and confidence among early-career academics. This approach can help

them develop positive coping strategies and navigate their academic journeys successfully (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016).

Black women in academia have established supportive networks, particularly through the Women Academic Solidarity Association (WASA). Originally founded by a group of predominantly black women academics, WASA aims to advocate for the interests of women in higher education. The association is dedicated to advancing women academics, mentoring postgraduate students, addressing human resource issues, and fostering a sense of community. It has become a vital support system, helping members navigate institutional challenges such as managing workloads, understanding promotion processes, and completing PhDs. Over time, WASA gained the reputation of an "angry feminist women's space" (p.18), reflecting its strong advocacy for black women. In addition to this, WASA provides support for women entering academia, organizing seminars and orientation programs. However, its mission expanded to encompass broader pro-transformation efforts, which often led to criticism about the lack of university-wide transformation. As the group took on additional responsibilities related to care work and supporting marginalized individuals within the university, its members recognized the invisible labor they performed, which went largely unacknowledged by the institution. Despite being recognized by the university, the contributions of WASA members were not considered in the promotion criteria, with their demanding and emotionally taxing work overlooked in the evaluation of their academic achievements (Magoqwana et al., 2019).

5.7 Intersections Between the Themes

The findings from this study highlight the intricate intersections between race, gender, identity, and power dynamics in the decolonisation process within South African higher education. A central theme is the tension between institutional inequalities and the individual lived experiences of academics, which are shaped by their race and gender. These dynamics are especially significant for black and white academics, who experience decolonisation differently based on their social identities. Black academics, particularly

women, face marginalisation within the academic structure and carry invisible labour that often goes unacknowledged. In contrast, white academics grapple with their privileged positionality, feeling guilt, ambivalence, and confronting the paradox of their status within a racialised academic environment.

These issues are compounded by neoliberal pressures in higher education, which further hinder decolonisation efforts. The corporatisation of universities, marked by increased workloads and market-driven priorities, creates a challenging environment for academics to engage with transformative curriculum reforms. The current study suggests that decolonisation is not just an intellectual process but also involves negotiating power, labour, and identity in the academic space. To address these challenges, the study advocates for a new theoretical perspective on decolonisation that incorporates the complexities of race, gender, and neoliberal pressures. This perspective would highlight the need for systemic reforms that promote inclusive, supportive, and equitable academic environments, ultimately allowing for meaningful decolonisation that reflects the diverse histories, experiences, and aspirations of both students and academics.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings from the included studies. The findings reveal a complex landscape in South African higher education regarding the decolonisation movement, where the authors in the included studies largely agree on the need for reform but differ in their interpretations, with some advocating for the integration of indigenous knowledge and social justice, while others prefer to retain Eurocentric content; black academics face unique historical and structural challenges, whereas white academics navigate their positionality with feelings of guilt or ambivalence. Neoliberal pressures and institutional inequities create a dehumanising environment, particularly affecting Black women, who encounter excessive caregiving roles and marginalisation, yet demonstrate resilience through community support. The market-driven focus on enrolment and funding has led to a corporate culture that undervalues teaching and local knowledge, emphasising

the urgency of integrating indigenous frameworks and fostering inclusive, participatory pedagogies to empower students.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the discussion of the findings included in the previous chapter. The current study was conducted to answer the research question: What is the literature's perspective on the understanding and experiences of social science academics regarding the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy in higher education in South Africa? The discussion in this chapter will aim to provide answers to this question and provide recommendations for future studies.

6.2 Discussion of Findings

This section expands on the findings from the previous chapter. It discusses social science academics' understanding of decolonisation, their lived experiences with decolonisation in higher education, the perceived barriers to decolonisation these academics experience, and strategies they employ to further the decolonisation project from the perspective of the literature included in the current systematic review.

6.2.1 Academics' Understanding of Decolonisation in Higher Education in South Africa

Findings from the current study indicate that while South African academics support decolonising higher education, interpretations vary widely, with some viewing it as integrating indigenous knowledge and promoting social justice, while others prefer maintaining Eurocentric content; overall, there is a consensus on the need for clarity and a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to achieve meaningful reform (Costandius et al., 2018; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018; Mashiyi et al., 2020; Pillay & Swanepoel, 2019). The findings from the included studies align with existing literature, indicating that the definition of decolonisation varies across disciplines (Asadullah, 2021; Lumadi, 2021) and depends on the specific

context (Stein et al., 2021). There is an overall agreement that decolonisation is a necessary process especially when reducing the Eurocentric hold on curriculum and pedagogy.

Academics who participated in the studies included in the systematic review recognise the need to reform both structural and intellectual aspects of institutions in need of reform to promote access and relevance and to address colonial legacies and practices in contemporary education. Senekal and Lenz (2020) found that participants from their study hold a reformist view of decolonisation and wish to enhance its relevance for the higher education students of South Africa. A study by Sathorar and Geduld (2019) indicated that most academics expressed favourable views on decolonisation, recognising its potential to foster critical thinking, creativity, and empowerment among students and academics. Academics in Hlathshwayo and Alexander's (2020) study emphasised the importance of uncovering the colonial roots of curricula by examining prescribed reading materials and restoring African historiographies. One academic described decolonisation as a process that involves an interaction between decolonising both the mind and the physical environment in which one lives.

6.2.2 Lived Experiences of Social Science Academics in the Decolonisation of Higher Education in South Africa

When it comes to the lived experiences of social science academics in the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa, the studies highlight the complexities of identity, exclusion, and transformation within South African academia, illustrating the struggles and responsibilities faced by black and white academics alike in the process of decolonisation. While black academics encounter unique challenges tied to historical and structural racism (Bell et al., 2020; Daniels et al., 2024; Kgari-Masondo, 2020; Khunou et al., 2019; Kiguwa, 2019; Nathane, 2019; Phaswana, 2019), white academics grapple with their positionality, often feeling ambivalence or guilt, as they seek to participate meaningfully in dismantling colonial legacies in higher education (Brunsdon, 2019; Costandius et al., 2018; Frizell, 2019; Jawitz, 2016; Matthews, 2021). The findings reveal that neoliberal pressures,

racialised expectations, and institutional inequities create a dehumanising environment in higher education, where academics—particularly black women—struggle with low self-worth, racial alienation, and excessive caregiving roles, often feeling marginalised, overworked, and undervalued, yet finding resilience and hope in self-preservation and community.

Positionality refers to an academic's social and cultural positioning in relation to the power structures within the institution. It acknowledges how the individual's background influences their perspective and engagement with knowledge production, pedagogy, and institutional politics (Bayeck, 2022). Maldonado-Torres (2017) examines blackness from two perspectives: the phenomenology of blackness, which explores how blackness is lived and experienced, and the genealogy of blackness, which traces its development and entrenchment in modern society. Phaswana (2019) frames blackness as a political identity rather than a biological one, recognising that apartheid-era South Africa added complexity to this concept by institutionalising blackness in a hierarchical manner, unlike other countries. Magoqwana et al. (2019) highlight the challenges and complexities faced by higher education in South Africa as it seeks to expand and include a previously marginalised black majority, comprising Indian, Coloured, and African populations, who were historically denied access to these institutions. In Bell et al. (2020), one author expressed feeling like an imposter despite being part of the majority population in their home country, as they are constantly reminded that the university environment was not originally designed for people like them.

Black women academics frequently share experiences of being overlooked and excluded while still expected to carry out invisible labour (Daniels et al., 2024; Kiguwa, 2019; Mahabeer et al., 2018; Phaswana, 2019). This invisible labour intensifies their marginalisation within South African universities, relegating them to lower institutional ranks and preventing access to positions of power, echoing the dynamics of the apartheid era. Magoqwana et al. (2019, p.6) refer to these women as “academic housekeepers,” burdened with a combination of administrative tasks, research, teaching, supervision, and additional

student support responsibilities beyond their primary duties. The intersection of transformation initiatives and neoliberal policies has disproportionately placed the weight of service and care on women, especially working-class black women academics, who are often newer to academia and hold junior roles. Mahabeer et al. (2018) found that institutional pressures to meet performance expectations typically benefit male academics, who do not face the same challenges of balancing work with family obligations. This imbalance is rooted in the prevailing patriarchal system, which continues to disproportionately affect women in higher education.

The findings from Jawitz's (2016) study reveal how racial identity influences teaching practices within the racialised context of South African higher education. Their narratives reflect a heightened awareness of their white identity, which challenges the stereotype of white academics being oblivious to racial dynamics. These individuals positioned themselves as allies to black students, criticising the behaviours of their white colleagues that perpetuate a culture of alienation. Despite their efforts to support transformation, they grapple with the paradox of their white privilege, acknowledging both its advantages and the limitations it imposes in understanding black students' experiences. While distancing themselves from conservative, racist discourses, they also navigate the stigma of whiteness through selective silence, which may inadvertently uphold dominant racial norms. This study underscores the need for further research to address how white academics' interactions within this racialised space may continue to reinforce a hostile institutional environment for black students.

Neoliberal priorities in higher education, driven by institutional profitability and global competitiveness, have eroded collegiality and care (Mkhwanazi, 2023). Universities increasingly prioritise market-driven curricula aligned with industry demands, reinforcing hierarchical power structures where black women academics disproportionately face discrimination and harassment (Mahabeer et al., 2018). The commodification of education has also led to the casualisation of academic labour, with emergent academics—often precariously employed early-career scholars—navigating instability, self-doubt, and an

undervaluing of their teaching contributions. These challenges are particularly pronounced for women and black academics, whose experiences are further compounded by the intersection of gender and race. The undervaluing of their work is not only a result of their academic status but is also influenced by racial and gendered power dynamics within academia (Joubert & Clarence, 2024; Magoqwana et al., 2019; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016). This neoliberal climate marginalises decolonisation efforts, as institutional priorities remain tied to financial viability and international recognition rather than epistemic transformation. Nevertheless, some lecturers challenge these structures by fostering participatory, egalitarian classrooms that emphasise critical engagement and social justice, resisting the pressures of a corporatised academic environment (Mashiya et al., 2020; Sathorar & Geduld, 2019; Senekal & Lenz, 2020; Sibanda, 2021).

6.2.3 Perceived Barriers to Decolonisation as Experienced by Social Science Academics

The expansion and widespread accessibility of higher education in South Africa has led to a market-driven focus, fostering a corporate culture that prioritises enrolment and funding over meaningful transformation, with academics facing increased pressure to meet institutional metrics while navigating structural inequalities, resistance to decolonisation, and limitations in supporting Black and female scholars (Daniels et al., 2024; Magoqwana et al., 2019). The commodification of higher education in African universities necessitates a reassessment of decolonisation, as a focus on social mobility and competition diminishes the validity of local knowledge, marginalises Black academics, and perpetuates reliance on Eurocentric frameworks, underscoring the urgent need to integrate indigenous knowledge while fostering an inclusive educational environment (Waghid, 2021).

The pressures of global capitalism and neoliberalism in higher education are restructuring academic labour into a quantifiable model that imposes increased workloads, particularly on black African women academics, who face unrecognised invisible labour alongside the dual expectations of caregiving and fulfilling academic roles, thereby

perpetuating their marginalisation and reinforcing historical hierarchies reminiscent of apartheid dynamics (Magoqwana et al., 2019; Nathane, 2019). Academics often navigate the balance between their personal identities (race, gender, class, cultural background) and their professional roles (teaching, research, and knowledge production). This intersection can create unique challenges, especially for those from historically marginalised groups, such as first-generation academics or women of colour (Nathane, 2019).

The broad expansion of higher education in South Africa has profoundly transformed the institutional landscape, driven by a government funding model tied to student enrolment numbers. These shifts have reshaped academic roles, reinforcing a corporate, managerial culture that intensifies existing bureaucratic processes. Academics are increasingly required to align their work with managerial performance metrics, balancing institutional research targets and teaching responsibilities within this business-like higher education environment. The unequal distribution of teaching responsibilities and the rise of new managerial practices create a culture that sustains hierarchies, leaving little time for curriculum transformation and perpetuating unequal power dynamics in the workplace (Magoqwana et al., 2019).

Chasi (2019) highlights the disconnect between lecturers and students in some undergraduate classes, noting that students do not know their lecturers' names or appearances due to large class sizes for some social science modules, which prevent meaningful interactions. This sentiment is supported by other studies, such as Costandius et al. (2018), which argue that the concept of safe spaces in education might be idealistic and constrained by the size of classrooms. Similarly, Garusta (2023) acknowledges the challenges within current university systems, where grades are ranked and evaluated, fostering competition rather than promoting a community of learning. This competitive environment impedes decolonisation efforts, particularly for those applying a decolonised pedagogy.

Maistry and Le Grange (2023) found that although South African universities have responded to student-led demands for transformation and decolonisation of the curriculum,

university management continues to follow a governance model rooted in neoliberalism. This model prioritises accountability, surveillance, performance, and adherence to university rankings, all of which are products of a white, Western, male-dominated academic culture. The anti-blackness inherent in this system remains obscured, particularly in its control over knowledge and knowledge production. As a result, despite claims of transformation and black restoration, colonialism is perpetuated, with coloniality continuing to influence higher education.

Universities, in keeping with international trends, treat their academics as “human capital” (p.2), subjecting them to continuous evaluation through rankings, ratings, and market-based metrics. In South Africa, for example, faculty members are often undervalued if they do not have high ratings or significant external grants for relevant research projects. This approach highlights how rewards and incentives primarily focus on institutional autonomy and meeting the university's needs, often disregarding the personal aspirations and needs of the academics themselves (Waghid, 2021). Morreira (2017) found that universities maintain their status and prestige by adhering to promotion criteria rooted in a Euro-American framework. This system prioritises publishing in prestigious journals, places secondary importance on teaching responsibilities, and lastly recognises administrative roles or social engagement, reinforcing a hierarchical structure that values traditional academic achievements over broader contributions.

6.2.4 Strategies Employed by Academics for Decolonisation

Lecturers are increasingly adopting participatory and inclusive teaching methods that draw on personal experiences and diverse knowledge systems, such as Afro-decoloniality and indigenous frameworks, to create relational learning environments that foster critical consciousness and empower students as active knowledge producers, while also addressing systemic power imbalances and the need for emotional authenticity in academia (Garusta, 2023; Sathorar & Geduld, 2019). Academics emphasise the necessity of collaboration among educators, students, and communities to create a culturally relevant

curriculum that integrates Afrocentric and Eurocentric knowledge, underpinned by the Ubuntu philosophy, while addressing systemic barriers and biases in academia, with a focus on mentorship and supportive networks to enhance the experiences and success of black women academics, as exemplified by initiatives like the Women Academic Solidarity Association (WASA), which seeks to empower women in higher education despite the challenges of invisible labour (Garusta, 2023; Kgari-Masondo, 2020; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018; Morreira et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the studies included in the research that sought to understand social sciences academics' experiences described them as complex and multifaceted, shaped by tensions between institutional constraints, personal commitments to decolonisation, and the challenges of navigating power dynamics within higher education spaces. A recurring theme was the tension between race, gender, and the conflicting roles academics were expected to fulfil, compounded by feelings of exclusion fostered by a hostile internal culture. These intersecting challenges highlight the demand for systemic reforms which create inclusive and supportive environments for meaningful decolonisation efforts.

The discussion of findings addresses how social science academics understand, experience, and navigate decolonisation in higher education in South Africa, directly answering the research questions. The findings demonstrate the varied ways in which decolonisation is understood and enacted across disciplines and institutions, revealing the complexities of how academics, particularly black and women academics, interpret and engage with this process. The lived experiences of these academics highlight the significant influence of identity, power dynamics, and institutional structures in shaping their involvement with decolonial work. Furthermore, the analysis uncovers the systemic challenges and barriers, such as neoliberal constraints, racialised hierarchies, and the undervaluing of certain forms of academic labour, that impede meaningful decolonisation efforts. Finally, the discussion illustrates the strategies employed by academics to resist these obstacles, including participatory teaching, mentorship, and the integration of

indigenous knowledge. These strategies showcase the agency of academics in advancing decolonial practices, despite structural constraints. Collectively, these insights answer the research questions by shedding light on the nuanced realities of academics' engagement with decolonisation, as reflected in existing research

6.3 Contributions and Implications of the Study

This study synthesises and critically engages with existing literature on the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa, particularly from the perspective of social science academics. By conducting a systematic review, it offers a comprehensive overview of how academics understand, experience, and navigate decolonisation, addressing gaps in fragmented literature. The study explores how identity, race, gender, and institutional power dynamics influence academics' engagement with decolonial work, with a focus on the individual experiences and perspectives of those involved. It offers valuable insights into the ways in which these factors shape how academics interpret and respond to decolonisation, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex and varied nature of this process in higher education. By engaging with neoliberalism and colonial legacies, this study explores how market-driven priorities and managerialism are experienced and understood in relation to decolonial efforts, highlighting the ways they may be perceived as facilitating or obstructing transformation.

The findings can inform university policies on transformation and curriculum reform, particularly by emphasising the importance of clarity in defining decolonisation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional support for decolonial work. The study underscores the need for mentorship programs and supportive networks, particularly for black and women academics who face heightened marginalisation within the academy. Institutions should re-evaluate performance metrics and workload distribution, ensuring that teaching, mentorship, and service work (often disproportionately placed on women and black scholars) are recognised and rewarded appropriately. The research furthermore supports the

integration of Afrocentric and Indigenous knowledge systems into curricula while maintaining critical engagement with existing global knowledge production.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

The subjective nature of the chosen methods introduces the potential for researcher bias, where the researcher's personal beliefs, attitudes, or perspectives may influence the study's outcomes (Flemming et al., 2019). This could impact decisions on which studies to include, how the findings are interpreted, and which themes are highlighted. Additionally, studies with positive or studies with significant results are more likely to be published, whereas those with neutral or negative outcomes are often disregarded or underreported, thus skewing the review's conclusions. This publication bias can hinder a comprehensive understanding of the full spectrum of decolonisation experiences in higher education. Thematic synthesis may also have limited interpretive strength, potentially leading to overly simplistic conclusions that may not effectively inform decision-making. Furthermore, this approach may struggle to translate broad findings into clear, actionable insights (Flemming et al., 2019). The use of a thematic synthesis within an interpretive paradigm, without incorporating a critical component, may have constrained the researcher's ability to critically reflect on and offer a personal perspective on the results of the qualitative systematic review.

The limited scope of available studies may be another limitation of this research (Booth et al., 2018). Given the recent focus on decolonisation in higher education and the focus on the South African context, there may be a limited number of studies specifically addressing this topic, particularly from diverse geographical and cultural contexts. This can lead to an incomplete understanding of global perspectives and limit the generalisability of the findings. Numerous studies exploring lived experiences depend on self-reported data, which may be shaped by participants' social desirability, perceptions, or memory biases. This may affect the reliability of the conclusions drawn about social science academics' experiences. Combining qualitative data from multiple sources involves subjective interpretation and may result in the loss of nuanced details specific to individual studies. This

synthesis process can also reduce complex experiences into broad themes, potentially oversimplifying the diversity of academics' lived experiences (Butler et al., 2016). Another limitation of the study is that it does not account for the experiences of non-South African academics working in South African higher education institutions, particularly in relation to the push for decolonisation. While the study focuses on the racial groups as conceived during the Apartheid period, experiences of alienation and exclusion are not unique to South African academics; many non-South African scholars in the social sciences may also encounter similar challenges. As such, the exclusion of non-South African academics' perspectives on decolonisation represents a gap in the exploration of how these academics navigate the decolonial agenda within South African higher education

The systematic review methodology presents certain limitations, particularly in relation to the scope of included studies. Due to variations in indexing and database algorithms, some relevant studies may not have been captured in the search process. Additionally, the exclusion of grey literature, such as theses and dissertations, may have limited the depth and diversity of perspectives, as these sources often provide valuable, context-specific insights that are not always represented in peer-reviewed publications

.6.5 Recommendations

This research was limited to the experiences of social science academics in South Africa because of the scarcity of research in this context and the urgent need for decolonisation in South Africa's higher education. Future studies could expand the sample size to include larger and more diverse populations and similar studies can be conducted in diverse cultural or socio-economic contexts. The literature could also be examined again from a different paradigm or perspective, for example from a critical standpoint. Higher education institutions in the private sector could be included, as they did not form part of this study due to limited published research available. The sample can be expanded to include perspectives of academics from other academic fields such as natural sciences, health sciences, and applied sciences. Research can be conducted in diverse settings (cultural,

geographic, or institutional) to examine whether findings are consistent or context dependent.

New and related variables could be explored, such as additional demographic factors, different geographic regions, or alternative psychological dimensions. Future research could place greater emphasis on the discourse and language used by academics, particularly focusing on terms like decolonisation and coloniality—how they are defined, interpreted, and employed in academic contexts, which have emerged in this research but lacked sufficient supporting data. Future research could focus on linking qualitative insights into the lived experiences of social science academics engaging in decolonisation efforts with practical strategies for institutional transformation. Specifically, studies could explore how these experiences inform the development of policies and frameworks that promote inclusive curricula, equitable academic spaces, and support mechanisms for marginalised scholars. For example, examining how academics navigate resistance to decolonisation efforts could provide actionable guidance for policymakers on implementing institutional policies that foster collaboration and reduce barriers to change. Such research could also inform professional development programs that equip academics with tools to effectively engage in decolonisation work while addressing the challenges of institutional inertia and resource constraints. Based on the findings of this study, practical policy recommendations to advance decolonisation in higher education include the implementation of clear institutional policies that prioritise curriculum transformation, faculty development, and the integration of Afrocentric and Indigenous knowledge systems. Equitable workload distribution is essential to address the disproportionate burden on Black women and early-career academics, ensuring that decolonial work is formally recognised in promotion and tenure processes. Structured mentorship programs should be established to support marginalised scholars, alongside dedicated funding for decolonial research and curriculum reform. Institutions must also provide ongoing training on decolonial pedagogy, anti-racist teaching, and diverse epistemologies. Resisting neoliberal pressures requires policy shifts that move beyond

market-driven education models, prioritising social justice, epistemic plurality, and community engagement. Additionally, universities should strengthen policies against discrimination and harassment to create safe and inclusive work environments. Lastly, fostering collaboration with student movements and local communities will ensure that decolonisation efforts reflect the lived experiences and needs of those historically marginalised by colonial legacies.

6.6 Reflexivity Throughout the Study

Reflexivity played a crucial role in this study, as it allowed me to examine how my own positionality as a researcher influenced my interpretations and the way I interacted with the data. Early on, I acknowledged that my background, identity, and academic experience shaped how I approached the topic of decolonisation in South African higher education. Being a student in the MA Psychology Program at the University of Pretoria, I was conscious of the way my own experience of navigating academia, particularly as a South African, might influence my interpretation of the challenges faced by black and women academics.

One example of reflexivity in action was when I encountered themes of racialised and gendered academic labour. As a researcher, I made an intentional effort to examine my own biases and experiences within these areas, particularly as they intersected. For example, when analysing the challenges faced by women and black academics, I reflected on my own experiences of gender and race in academic spaces, recognising that these might have shaped my interpretation of the data. In some instances, I found myself empathising strongly with participants who shared struggles similar to my own, which required me to remain critically aware of these emotional responses to ensure they did not cloud my analysis.

Reflexivity also played out in the way I engaged with the literature. I continuously questioned how my understanding of decolonisation might be influenced by both Western and local academic traditions. This led me to actively seek diverse perspectives in my literature review and ensure that my analysis was grounded in the lived experiences of the participants rather than theoretical frameworks alone.

In conclusion, reflexivity was not a passive process in this study but rather an active and ongoing practice that allowed me to continuously evaluate my role as a researcher, the impact of my identity, and how these factors intersected with the research process.

6.7 Conclusion

The definition of decolonisation varies among academics, often depending on their field of study or discipline, highlighting the need for a shared understanding through a transdisciplinary approach. Race and gender significantly influence how academics approach decolonisation and shape their experiences within universities that claim to be decolonised. Studies authored by white academics often express ambivalence and uncertainty about their role in the decolonisation process. In contrast, many Black academics report feelings of exhaustion, exclusion, and infantilisation, which negatively affect their psychological well-being and engagement in decolonial work.

Efforts at decolonisation frequently strain relationships with students and peers due to universities' emphasis on quantifiable outcomes. Power imbalances persist between students and faculty, exacerbated by resistance from higher education institutions, other faculty members, and sometimes students themselves. Emergent academics face additional challenges such as precarious employment, job insecurity, heavy teaching loads, and limited access to resources. These barriers hinder professional development, foster feelings of displacement and inadequacy, and perpetuate inequalities, particularly for young, black, and women academics in South Africa's hierarchical and corporatised academic environment.

The current study illustrated the subjective psychological experiences academics undergo in response to decolonisation efforts. Exclusion, marginalisation, and a loss of sense of belonging harm the psychological well-being of academics. Efforts to change the institutional culture have been resisted, and often academics are penalised for their attempts. The study also highlights the key role academics play in the decolonisation process, and how their lived experiences shape their ability to be agents of change.

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Appendix A: Ethics Committee Approval Letter



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho



9 July 2024

Dear Miss M Botha

Project Title: Decolonisation efforts in higher education and the lived experiences of social science academics: A systematic review
Researcher: Miss M Botha
Supervisor(s): Prof C Wagner
Department: Psychology
Reference number: 22788469 (HUM087/0524)
Degree: Masters

Thank you for the application that was submitted for ethical consideration.

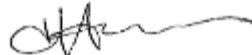
The Research Ethics Committee notes that this is a literature-based study and no human subjects are involved.

The application has been approved on 27 June 2024 with the assumption that the document(s) are in the public domain. Data collection may therefore commence, along these guidelines.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. However, should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, a new research proposal and application for ethical clearance will have to be submitted for approval.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,



Prof Karen Harris
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof K. Harris (Chair), Dr S. Mkhondo, Mr A. Boko, Dr S. Chigona, Dr A-M de Beer, Dr A. Dos Santos, Prof Salome Geertsema, Prof P. Gubbay, Ms KT Govender-Andrew, Dr D. Krige, Mr A. Mohamed, Dr T. Ntshona-Ramunonywa, Dr I. Noomé, Dr C. Puttergill, Prof D. Reybunq, Prof E. Tsjard

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Appendix B: Data Analysis Audit Trail

The stages of a systematic review consist of the following: constructing the research question, scoping search, protocol development, comprehensive and systematic search, selection of studies against eligibility criteria, data extraction, appraisal of studies using a quality checklist, analysis of results, interpretation of findings, and dissemination (MacMillan et al., 2019).

Step 1: Constructing the research question

The research question of this study (What is the literature's perspective on the understanding and experiences of social science academics regarding the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy in higher education in South Africa?) guided the formation of the following questions of the review:

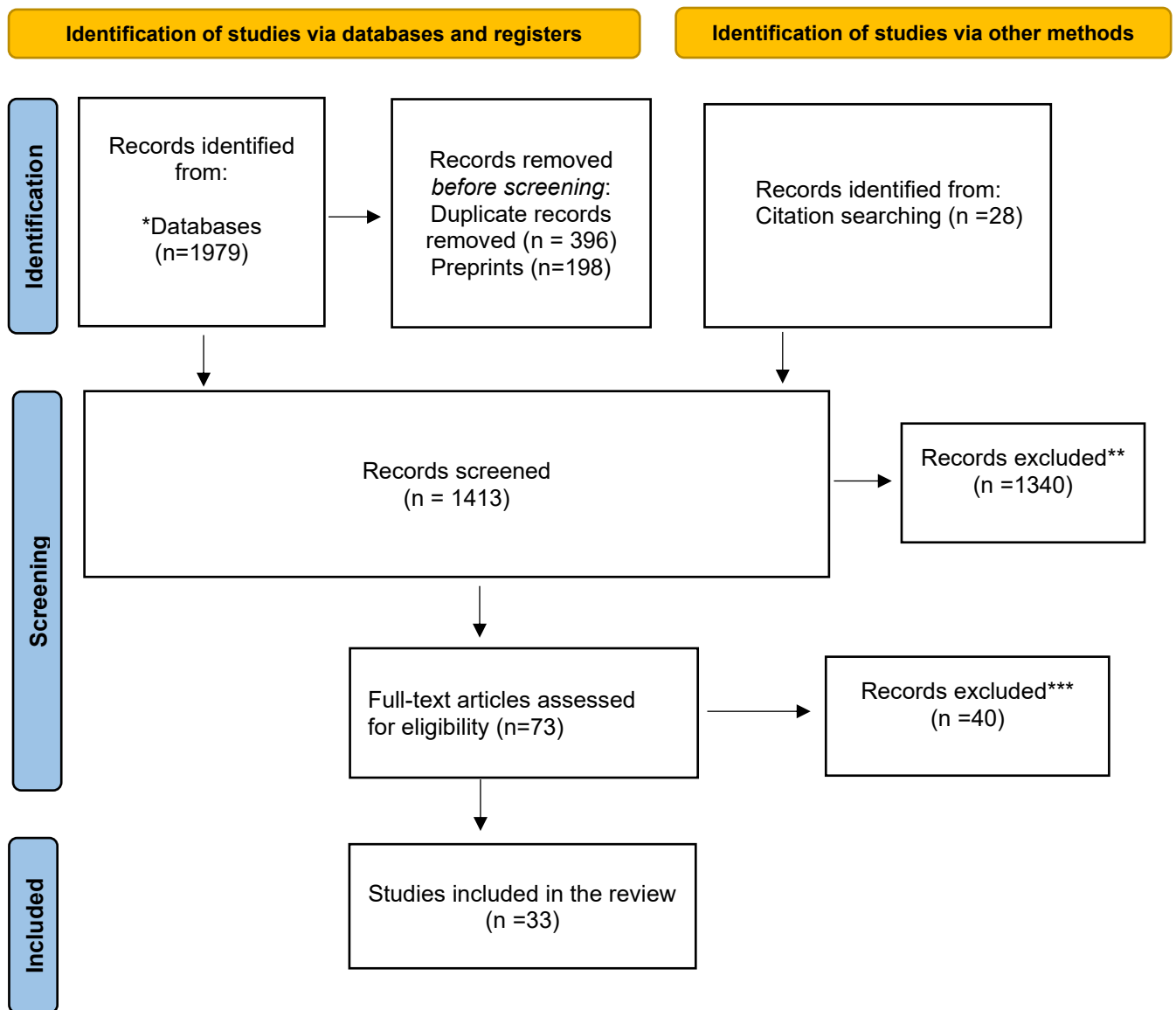
- How do educators experience and interpret decolonisation within their personal lives?
- How do scholars' positionality shape their interpretation and practice of decolonisation?
- How do academics construct the concept of decolonisation?
- How is decolonisation understood and framed differently according to various academics, tertiary institutions as a socially constructed process?
- How is language used in articles in terms of the use of symbolic language, metaphors and analogies?
- How do authors make meaning of decolonisation in relation to their teaching practices?
- How do academics interpret their own power, agency, and identity and how this influences their engagement with decolonisation?
- How do academics reflect on their own positions within the academic system?
- How is decolonisation efforts described in terms of relationships and interactions among scholars, students, and institutions?

Step 2: Scoping search

This study used two search techniques namely advanced searching and manual searching (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). Manual searching included handpicking, backward- and forward-tracking, citation, and reference tracking (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). Search databases included EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Sage, (Chapman, 2021; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020).

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) was followed as the standard for reporting search strategies.

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram as Applied in this Study



*Databases: Scopus = 595; EBSCOhost = 110; ERIC = 244; ProQuest = 800; Scielo = 8; Web of Science = 88; Wiley Online Library = 134

**Reasons for exclusion: quantitative or mixed methods methodology (n =202); non-academic populations: (n =133); irrelevant topic (n = 673); non-social science focus (n=135); geographical scope (n=135); language: (n=67)

***Reasons for exclusion: methodology, findings, wrong setting or context, irrelevance of the research question, no significant contribution

Step 3: Protocol Developmentz

| | |
|--|---|
| Research Title | |
| Decolonisation efforts in higher education and the lived experiences of social science academics: A systematic review | |
| Introduction | |
| PCO – Population, Context, Outcome (Modified PICO) (Butler et al., 2016) | |
| P - social science academics | |
| C - decolonisation in higher education | |
| O- Lived experiences | |
| Research Question: What is the understanding and experience of social science academics regarding the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy in higher education in South Africa as represented in existing published literature? | |
| The aim of the review: This study explores the literature's perspective on the understanding and experiences of social science academics regarding the decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy in higher education in South Africa. The objectives of this study are to examine how social science academics define, interpret, and navigate decolonisation within their disciplines and institutions; to analyse the influence of identity, power dynamics, and institutional structures on academics' engagement with decolonial work; and to identify the key challenges and barriers that social science academics, particularly early-career scholars, face in advancing decolonisation in higher education. | |
| Search Strategy | |
| Keywords and search terms | Synonyms and similar search terms |
| decolonisation | Anti-colonialism, post-colonialism, dismantling colonial structures, decolonial thinking, decolonizing, decolonization |
| higher education | Tertiary education, University education, further education, academic studies, higher learning, academic institutions, higher education institutions, curriculum, curricula, pedagogy, |
| academics' perspectives | Academia's stance, experiences, faculty opinions, conceptions, teaching in higher education, lecturers, faculty, educators, decolonisation of education |

| social sciences | Human sciences Social studies Behavioural sciences |
|---|---|
| qualitative systematic literature review | Sociology Anthropology Political science Economics Psychology Human geography Cultural studies Criminology Linguistics |
| <p>After identifying all relevant keywords, synonyms, and phrases within a search, Boolean operators need to be used to combine topic areas together</p> <p>The Boolean operators are “AND”, “OR”, and “NOT”:</p> <p>Using OR combines all the individual synonym terms together into one search and broadens your results by including references that have ANY ONE of the search terms within it</p> <p>Using AND focusses the search by combining keywords to find references that contain ALL of the keywords, to narrow your search</p> <p>Using NOT will eliminate items and limit a search further</p> | |
| Inclusion Criteria | Justification for Criteria |
| Type of studies: Phenomenological studies, Ethnographies, Case studies, Narrative studies | The types of studies included are those that use qualitative research methods to explore experiences, perceptions, meanings, or processes. |
| Secondary qualitative data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notes: Detailed notes taken during interviews, capturing key points and nuances. • Summaries: Analyses or summaries of focus group discussions, highlighting main themes and insights. • Field Notes: Detailed descriptions and interpretations of observed behaviours and interactions in natural settings. • Personal Documents: Diaries, letters, or autobiographies that provide insights into individual experiences and perspectives. | A qualitative systematic review synthesises and analyses findings from existing qualitative studies rather than collecting new, primary data. The review aims to provide an integrated understanding of a particular phenomenon by examining and comparing the qualitative data collected by other researchers. The data used will primarily consist of qualitative research findings from studies that explore subjective experiences, meanings, and processes |

| | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed Accounts: In-depth descriptions and analyses of individual or organisational cases, including findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis. • Personal Stories: Accounts or stories provided by individuals about their experiences and how they make sense of them. | |
| <p>Phenomena under study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decolonisation Efforts in Higher Education • Lived Experiences of Social Science Academics • Intersection of Decolonisation and Social Science Academia • Studies that explore the experiences, perspectives, and practices of social science academics in the context of decolonisation in higher education. | <p>The various dimensions and impacts of decolonisation efforts in higher education as they relate to the lived experiences of social science academics. The review would seek to understand how these academics perceive, experience, and are affected by decolonisation initiatives within their academic contexts.</p> |
| <p>Date of study Between 2016-2024</p> | <p>This period was chosen due to the publication boom on the topic following the 2015 and 2016 student protests in South Africa</p> |
| <p>Published in English</p> | <p>Due to limited resources, studies published in languages other than English are unable to be translated and included into the review.</p> |
| <p>Publications in peer-reviewed journals or credible academic sources.</p> | |
| <p>Exclusion Criteria</p> | <p>Justification</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative studies, unless they include a significant qualitative component. • Studies not related to higher education or social science academics. • Non-peer-reviewed sources. • Grey literature • Studies focused on other disciplines outside social sciences unless they provide comparative insights relevant to social science fields. | |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies that are not focused on the South African context • Quantitative studies, as the focus is on qualitative insights. • Studies that do not explicitly address decolonisation or lived experiences of academics, or those that focus solely on student experiences. | |
| <p>Databases</p> | <p>EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Sage, Web of Science, Scopus, Scielo, Eric</p> |
| <p>Search Strategies</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each column in Keywords and search terms contains a set of synonyms for the key search terms. • Each term in the column will be entered into the database and will be shortened where appropriate. • All individual searches for that column will be combined using the “OR” Boolean operator into a single group. • Each overall group will then be combined using the “AND” function to produce a final list of citations, which will be saved into Endnote, and screened for duplicates. • Records of all searches in each database will be maintained. |
| | <p>PRISMA 2020 Flowchart</p> |
| | <p>Manual searching will include handpicking, backward- and forward-tracking, citation, and reference tracking</p> |
| <p>Process for reviewing and selecting citations</p> | |
| <p>1. Initial Screening</p> | <p>Evaluate titles and abstracts of articles to determine if they meet basic inclusion criteria.</p> |
| <p>2. Full-Text Review</p> | <p>Assess full articles for relevance and inclusion. : Obtain and review the full texts of articles that passed the initial screening. This step involves a</p> |

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|---|--|
| | detailed examination of the methodology and findings. |
| 3. Quality Assessment | Evaluate the methodological quality of studies using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist in assessing the quality of qualitative research |
| 4. Data Extraction | Systematically extract relevant data. |
| 5. Data Synthesis | Analyse and synthesise qualitative data. Thematic qualitative synthesis |
| 6. Interpretation and Reporting | Summarise findings and their implications. |
| 7. Updating and Re-Evaluation (if needed) | Reassess and update the review as necessary |

Quality Assessment. Example of the application of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist (Attached)

| Item | Guidelines |
|---|--|
| Question 2: Appropriate for qualitative methodology | Exclude if inappropriate |
| Question 3: Research design | Yes- Specifically states research design, with justification <i>Unsure</i> - Outline of research design only <i>No</i> - Not discussed or inappropriate to research question |
| Question 5: Data collection | Yes- Addresses 4 or more items listed on the CASP checklist <i>Unsure</i> - Addresses 2-3 items listed on the CASP checklist <i>No</i> - Addresses less than 2 items |
| Question 7: Ethical considerations | Exclude if unclear or unstated ethical approval |
| Question 10: Recommendations | Yes- The following must be discussed: Contributions to existing knowledge, identifies areas for future research, makes recommendations based on results <i>Unsure</i> - only 2 items discussed <i>No</i> - only 1 item discussed |
| Scoring system: Yes: 1 point Unsure: 0.5 points No: 0 points | High-quality paper: Scores 9-10 Moderate-quality paper: Scores 7.5-9 Low-quality paper: Less than 7.5 Exclude: Less than 6 |

| Data Extraction & Analysis | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Data | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first order constructs (participants' quotes) • second order constructs (researcher interpretation, statements, assumptions and ideas) |
| Data extraction tool | Data extraction form |
| Data Synthesis | <p>The extracted data will be analysed utilising thematic analysis techniques, allowing clear identification of themes arising from the data, and facilitating higher order abstraction and theory development.</p> <p>Stage 1: Coding text: Free line-by-line coding of the findings from the primary studies will occur. Data will be examined for meaning and content during the coding. The codes will then be entered into a code book. This process will allow the translation of codes and concepts between studies.</p> <p>Stage 2: Developing descriptive themes: The codes will then be examined and analysed for their meanings, and reorganized into related categories. Each category will be analysed for its properties.</p> <p>Stage 3: Generating analytical themes: Each category will then be examined and compared to other categories, specifically looking for similarities and differences. Similar categories will be merged into higher level constructs and then themes, going beyond the findings of the original studies into a higher order abstraction of the phenomena.</p> |

Step 4: Comprehensive and Systematic Search

A full-text review was conducted to assess the relevance and inclusion of articles. Full texts of the articles that passed the initial screening during the scoping search were obtained and thoroughly reviewed. This process involved a detailed examination of the methodology and findings.

Step 5: Selection of Studies Against Eligibility Criteria

After reviewing the full text, studies were either included or excluded based on how well they matched the eligibility criteria. Reasons for exclusion were documented to ensure transparency.

Selection of Studies Against Eligibility Criteria

| | Title | Year | Author(s) | Journal | Database | Include or exclude | Reason for exclusion if excluded |
|----|--|------|--------------------|---|--------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Unearthing white academics' experience of teaching in higher education in SA | 2016 | J. Jawitz | Teaching in Higher Education | Google Scholar | Include | |
| 2 | The limits of being and knowledge in the academy | 2019 | E.D. Phaswana | Book Chapter-Black academics: The South African experience | ProQuest | Include | |
| 3 | Sitting on the bum: The struggle of survival and belonging for a black African woman in the academy | 2019 | M. Nathane | Book Chapter-Black academics: The South African experience | ProQuest | Include | |
| 4 | Academics' conceptions of higher education decolonisation | 2021 | J. Sibanda | South African Journal of Higher Education | Sabinet African Journals | Include | |
| 5 | Black in the academy: Reframing knowledge, the knower, and knowing | 2019 | Khunou et al. | Book Chapter-Black academics: The South African experience | ProQuest | Include | |
| 6 | An exploration of higher education teachers' experience of decolonising the Bachelor of Education honours curriculum | 2019 | Pillay & Swanepoel | Perspectives in Education | WorldCat.org | Include | |
| 7 | Troubling whiteness: A critical autoethnographic exploration of being white in the context of calls for the decolonisation | 2019 | Frizelle | PINS | WorldCat.org | Include | |
| 8 | Curriculum responsiveness within the context of decolonisation in SA higher education | 2017 | Fomunyan & Teferra | Perspectives in Education | Google Scholar | Exclude | No contribution or insight |
| 9 | Decolonisation of education: exploring a new praxis for sustainable development | 2019 | Uleanya et al. | African Identities | Google Scholar | Exclude | Mixed methodology |
| 10 | Decolonising the South African higher education curriculum : An investigation into the challenges | 2020 | Senekal & Lenz | International journal of social sciences and humanity studies | Google Scholar | Include | |
| 11 | Building a decolonial knower: Contestations in the humanities | 2022 | K. Lockett | Book chapter - Decolonising knowledge and | ProQuest | Exclude | Focus is more on student |

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|--------|---|------|------------------------|--|-----------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|
| | | | | knowers: Struggles for university transformation in South Africa | | | experience s |
| 1 2 | Decolonisation of education in South Africa: Challenges to decolonise the university curriculum | 2021 | P. Du Plessis | South African Journal of Higher Education | Sabinet African Journals | Exclude | HoD's perspective |
| 1 3 | #Feesmustfall and decolonising the curriculum: Stellenbosch university students' and lecturers' reactions | 2018 | Costandius et al. | South African Journal of Higher Education | Sabinet African Journals | Include | |
| 1 4 | "We've been taught to understand that we don't have anything to contribute towards knowledge": Exploring academics' understanding of decolonising curricula in higher education | 2021 | Hlatshwayo & Alexander | Journal of Education | WorldCat.org | Include | |
| 1 5 | Lecturer conceptions of and approaches to decolonisation of curricula in higher education | 2020 | Mashiye et al. | South African Journal of Higher Education | Scielo | Include | |
| 1 6 | Why decolonising the South African university curriculum will fail | 2020 | Vandeyar | Teaching in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives | Taylor and Francis Journals | Exclude | Technical focus on curriculum |
| 1 7 | Don't teach me nonsense | 2019 | C.T. Chasi | Book Chapter-Black academics: The South African experience | ProQuest | Include | |
| 1 8 | Negotiating the academy: Black bodies " out of place" | 2019 | P. Kiguwa | Book Chapter-Black academics: The South African experience | ProQuest | Include | |
| 1 9 | Practical Theology and Social Just Pedagogies as Decoloniality Space | 2023 | J. Klaasen | Religions | EBSCOhost | Exclude | Irrelevant topic/ focus |
| 2 0 | Decolonisation: Why Decolonising Teacher Education Is Far From Realities In South Africa | 2024 | O.A. Ajani | Webology | EBSCOhost | Exclude | Methodology |
| 2 1 | Decolonising while white: confronting race in a South African classroom | 2021 | S. Matthews | Teaching in Higher Education | EBSCOhost | Include | |
| 2 2 | 'It Gives Me Anxiety!' Black Academics' Experiences of Teaching Large Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic in a South African University | 2023 | Hlatshwayo et al. | Perspectives in Education | ERIC | Exclude | Focuses on COVID-19 and online |

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|--------|---|------|----------------|--|--------------------------|---------|--|
| | | | | | | | experience s |
| 2 3 | Strategies to realise the decoloniality of the Comparative and International Education curriculum in South African higher education | 2023 | K. J. Maluleka | South African Journal of Higher Education | EBSCOhost | Exclude | No personal insight |
| 2 4 | Academic freedom and the decolonisation of knowledge: curriculum transformation in South Africa from a UNESCO perspective | 2023 | E.J Olsson | Studies in Higher Education | ERIC | Exclude | Outsider perspective |
| 2 5 | Are they using any strategy to decolonize the curriculum? English lecturers' experiences: Strategies to decolonize the curriculum | 2024 | Mbhele et al. | Hungarian Educational Research Journal | ERIC | Exclude | No contribution or insight |
| 2 6 | Moving from Discourse to Praxis: Situating Academics at the Centre of Decolonisation Struggle | 2023 | Sibiya & Ndaba | South African Journal of Higher Education | Sabinet African Journals | Exclude | No contribution or insight |
| 2 7 | Practical theology and the call for the decolonisation of Higher Education in South Africa: Reflections and proposals | 2017 | S. Dreyer | HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies | WorldCat.org | Exclude | Reflect on discipline, not personal experience |
| 2 8 | Steps Towards Decolonial Higher Education in Southern Africa? Epistemic Disobedience in the Humanities | 2017 | S. Morreira | Journal of Asian and African Studies | WorldCat.org | Include | |
| 2 9 | Decolonisation of the curriculum: A case study of the Durban University of Technology in South Africa | 2018 | Mheta et al. | South African Journal of Education | Sabinet African Journals | Exclude | No personal insight |
| 3 0 | Between Higher and Basic Education in South Africa: What Does Decolonisation Mean for Teacher Education? | 2019 | Sayed et al. | Book Chapter - Decolonisation in universities: The Politics of Knowledge | ProQuest | Exclude | No personal insight |
| 3 1 | The Institutional Curriculum, Pedagogy and the Decolonisation of the South African University | 2019 | L. Lange | Book Chapter - Decolonisation in universities: The Politics of Knowledge | ProQuest | Exclude | No personal insight |
| 3 2 | South African Universities between Decolonisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution | 2021 | L. Lange | Book Chapter- The Responsive University and the Crisis in South Africa | ProQuest | Exclude | Not academics' perspective |

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|--------|--|------|-----------------------|---|--------------------------|---------|----------------------------|
| 3 3 | True versus False Transformation: A Discussion of the Obstacles to Authentic Decolonisation at South African Universities | 2019 | D. Zwane | International Journal of African Renaissance Studies - Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity | Sabinet African Journals | Exclude | No personal insight |
| 3 4 | Place and pedagogy: using space and materiality in teaching social science in Southern Africa | 2020 | Morreira et al. | Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal | Google Scholar | Include | |
| 3 5 | Epistemic (in)justice and decolonisation in higher education: Experiences of a cross-site teaching project | 2020 | Khoo et al. | Acta Academica | EBSCOhost | Exclude | No personal insight |
| 3 6 | 'Selfishly backward' or 'selflessly forward?': A white male's insider perspective on a challenge and opportunity of decolonisation for practical theology in the South African context | 2019 | A.R. Brunsdon | HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies | EBSCOhost | Include | |
| 3 7 | African higher education and decolonizing the teaching of philosophy | 2022 | L. Cordeiro-Rodrigues | Educational philosophy and theory | EBSCOhost | Exclude | Outsider perspective |
| 3 8 | Decolonising Higher Education: The Academic's Turn | 2022 | S. Vandeyar | Equity & Excellence in Education | ERIC | Exclude | No real insight |
| 3 9 | What good is anthropology? | 2023 | N. Mkhwanazi | Journal of the American Ethnological Society | Wiley Online Library | Include | |
| 4 0 | Retrospective Autoethnographies: A Call for Decolonial Imaginings for the New University | 2020 | Bell et al. | Qualitative Inquiry | WorldCat.org | Include | |
| 4 1 | Analysis of decolonisation of higher education in a new South African university | 2020 | S. Machingambi | African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning | ProQuest | Exclude | No contribution or insight |
| 4 2 | On violence in South African higher education: An ideological perspective | 2024 | M. Hlatshwayo | Perspectives in Education | ProQuest | Exclude | No contribution or insight |
| 4 3 | A critical arts-based narrative of five educators working in higher education during an era of transformation in South Africa | 2018 | M. Müller | Journal of Education | Scielo | Include | |
| 4 4 | 'I just feel very dispensable': Exploring the connections between precarity and identity for academic literacy developers | 2024 | Joubert & Clarence | Journal of English for Academic Purposes | Scopus | Include | |

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|--------|--|------|----------------------|--|-----------------------------|---------|--|
| 4 5 | South African new academics' experiences of precarity: Becoming and unbecoming the condition of coloniality through collective reflexivity | 2024 | Daniels et al. | Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning | Scopus | Include | |
| 4 6 | Reflecting on lecturer dispositions to decolonise teacher education | 2019 | Sathorar & Geduld | Journal of Education | Scielo | Include | |
| 4 7 | Authentication of an academic culture in a Social Work programme offered at a South African university: A value-driven approach towards a decolonised curriculum | 2019 | Engelbrecht et al. | International Social Work | Web of Science | Exclude | Not specific, just descriptive general |
| 4 8 | Towards decoloniality in a social work programme: a process of dialogue, reflexivity, action and change | 2021 | Rasool & Harms-Smith | Critical African studies | Web of Science | Exclude | No contribution or insight |
| 4 9 | Academics with Clay Feet? Anthropological Perspectives on Academic Freedom in Twenty-First Century African Universitie | 2022 | Nhemachena & Mawere | Journal of African American Studies | Web of Science | Exclude | No contribution or insight |
| 5 0 | Decolonizing South African sociology: Building on a shared "text of Blackness" | 2016 | Mangcu | Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race | Web of Science | Exclude | No contribution or insight |
| 5 1 | Transplanting the Fairy Tale: An Afrocentric Perspective | 2018 | Livingston | Education as Change | Web of Science | Inlcude | |
| 5 2 | Young, gifted and black: Black early career academics' experiences in a South African university | 2024 | Hlatshwayo & Majazi | SA Journal of Human Resource Management | Web of Science | Exclude | No personal reflections |
| 5 3 | South African Higher Education as Mutating Plantation:Critical Reflections on Navigating a Racialized Space | 2023 | Maistry & Le Grange | Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association | Web of Science | Include | |
| 5 4 | Innovation in Communication and Media Studies: Reflections from South African Academics | 2020 | Chasi & Rodny-Gumede | Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research | Web of Science | Exclude | Irrelevant topic |
| 5 5 | Decolonisation of institutional structures in South African universities: A critical perspective | 2019 | Albertus | Cogent Social Sciences | Taylor and Francis Journals | Exclude | No contribution or insight |

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|----|--|------|------------------------------|---|--------------------------|---------|----------------------|
| 56 | Decolonising the curriculum to reinvigorate equity in higher education: A linguistic transformation | 2021 | M.W. Lumadi | South African Journal of Higher Education | Sabinet African Journals | Exclude | Irrelevant |
| 57 | An Autoethnography of the Feminist Pedagogical Strategies Used in Teaching and Learning to Promote Inclusive Classrooms | 2023 | T. Garusta | African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning | EBSCOhost | Include | |
| 58 | Indigenous Psychology: Going Nowhere Slowly? | 2019 | W. Long | Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology | EBSCOhost | Exclude | Irrelevant context |
| 59 | Decolonising Psychology in residential and open distance e-learning institutions: critical reflections | 2018 | Kiguwa & Segalo | South African Journal of Psychology | Google Scholar | Include | |
| 60 | Centre/ing decolonial feminist psychology in Africa | 2018 | Kessi & Boonzaaier | South African Journal of Psychology | Google Scholar | Include | |
| 61 | Attaining epistemic justice through transformation and decolonisation of education curriculum in Africa | 2019 | D. Masaka | African Identities | Google Scholar | Exclude | No real contribution |
| 62 | Re-imagining africanisation of sustainable epistemologies and pedagogies in (South) African Higher Education : a conceptual intervention | 2020 | Sebola & Mogoboya | South African Journal of Higher Education | Sabinet African Journals | Exclude | No personal insight |
| 63 | 'The whitest guy in the room': thoughts on decolonization and paideia in the South African university | 2024 | D.Griffiths | Journal of Philosophy of Education | Google Scholar | Exclude | No real contribution |
| 64 | Decolonising the African University again | 2021 | Y. Waghid | South African Journal of Higher Education | Sabinet African Journals | Include | |
| 65 | In pursuit of a decolonised history teacher: Agency and boldness in fostering change | 2020 | M.C. Kgari-Masondo | International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education & History Culture | EBSCOhost | Include | |
| 66 | Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging Black women academics in Curriculum Studies at a university in South Africa | 2018 | Mahabeer et al. | Agenda | Google Scholar | Include | |
| 67 | Are we there yet? An intersectional take on Black women academics' experiences in a South African university | 2023 | M.N Hlatshwayo & B.M. Ngcobo | Journal of Education | Google Scholar | Include | |

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|----|---|------|------------------------|--|----------------|---------|--------------------------------------|
| 68 | Social work and indigenisation: A South African perspective | 2018 | Mogorosi & Thabede | Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development | Google Scholar | Exclude | Does not provide personal experience |
| 69 | "Forced to care" at the Neoliberal University: Invisible Labour as Academic Labour Performed by Black Women Academics in the South African University | 2019 | Magoqwan a et al. | South African Review of Sociology | Google Scholar | Include | |
| 70 | Being Black in South African higher education: An intersectional insight. | 2020 | Hlatshwayo | Acta Academica Critical Views on Society Culture and Politics | Google Scholar | Exclude | No personal insight |
| 71 | Redefining 'early career' in academia: a collective narrative approach | 2017 | Bosanquet et al. | Higher Education Research & Development | Google Scholar | Exclude | Context |
| 72 | 'A one-sided view of the world': women of colour at the intersections of academic freedom. | 2022 | Blell et al. | The International Journal of Human Rights | Google Scholar | Exclude | Irrelevant context |
| 73 | Sink or swim?: Learning from stories of becoming academics within a transforming university terrain | 2016 | Pithouse-Morgan et al. | South African Journal of Higher Education | Google Scholar | Include | |

Step 6: Data Extraction

Contextual information, demographic information, perceptual information, theoretical information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

For this study, data was first-order constructs such as the quotes of participants as well as second-order constructs such as the previous researchers' interpretations, assumptions, ideas, and statements (Butler et al., 2016). Data that was extracted included the title of the article, author(s), journal publication, publication year, research methodology, and research topic (Chikoko, 2021).

Example of data extracted

| Title | Year | Author(s) | Journal | Methodology | Discipline | Demographics (age, race, gender) | Years of experience | Level of appointment | Level of students | Findings |
|--|------|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|--|------------------------|---|----------------------|---|
| Are we there yet? An intersectional take on Black women academics' experiences in a South African university | 2023 | Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo | Journal of Education | Qualitative interpretivist case study | Not specified | Black women | Various | Ranges from early career academics, lecturers, to senior professors | Not specified | A large number of participants were "accidental academics" in higher education due to the nature of their entry and access to the university. The important role that formal and informal mentoring plays in higher education as a catalyst for helping Black women academics access, negotiate, and succeed at university. |
| Unearthing white academics' experience of teaching in higher education in SA | 2016 | Jawitz | Teaching in Higher Education | Qualitative interpretivist case study | Purposefully not included | White males | Not specified | Not specified | Not specified | Focused on analysing indicators of white academics identity and how they are both positioned and actively position themselves in relation to students and other academics. The narratives reveal how academics simultaneously grapple with the privileges and |

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|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | | | | | | | | | | limitations that accompany identifying as white. |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|

| | Author(s) | Title | Year | Journal | Discipline | Participants | Methodology |
|---|-------------------|--|------|---|---|--------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Bell et al. | Retrospective Autoethnographies: A Call for Decolonial Imaginings for the New University | 2020 | Qualitative Inquiry | Not specified | 4 | Retrospective autoethnographies |
| 2 | Brunsdon | 'Selfishly backward' or 'selflessly forward?': A white male's insider perspective on a challenge and opportunity of decolonisation for practical theology in the South African context | 2019 | HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies | Theology | 1 | Autoethnography |
| 3 | Chasi | Don't teach me nonsense | 2019 | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Communication and media studies | 1 | Autoethnography |
| 4 | Costandius et al. | #Feesmustfall and decolonising the curriculum: Stellenbosch university students' and lecturers' reactions | 2018 | South African Journal of Higher Education | Multiple | 28 | Case study |
| 5 | Daniels et al. | South African new academics' experiences of precarity: Becoming and unbecoming the condition of coloniality through collective reflexivity | 2024 | Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning | Multiple (Humanities, Health Sciences and Higher education) | 4 | Autoethnography |
| 6 | Frizelle | Troubling whiteness: A critical autoethnographic exploration of being white in the context of calls for the decolonisation | 2019 | PINS | Psychology | 1 | Critical autoethnography |
| 7 | Garusta | An Autoethnography of the Feminist Pedagogical Strategies Used in Teaching and Learning to Promote Inclusive Classrooms | 2023 | African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning | Sociology | 1 | Autoethnography |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------|---|------|---|---------------------------|----|---------------------------------------|
| 8 | Hlatshwayo & Alexander | "We've been taught to understand that we don't have anything to contribute towards knowledge": Exploring academics' understanding of decolonising curricula in higher education | 2021 | Journal of Education | Education | 8 | Qualitative interpretivist case study |
| 9 | Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo | Are we there yet? An intersectional take on Black women academics' experiences in a South African university | 2023 | Journal of Education | Not specified | 10 | Qualitative interpretivist case study |
| 10 | Jawitz | Unearthing white academics' experience of teaching in higher education in SA | 2016 | Teaching in Higher Education | Purposefully not included | 4 | Qualitative interpretivist case study |
| 11 | Joubert & Clarence | 'I just feel very dispensable': Exploring the connections between precarity and identity for academic literacy developers | 2024 | Journal of English for Academic Purposes | Academic literacy | 15 | Qualitative surveys and interviews |
| 12 | Kgari-Masondo | In pursuit of a decolonised history teacher: Agency and boldness in fostering change | 2020 | International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education & History Culture | History | 1 | Autoethnography |
| 13 | Khunou et al. | Black in the academy: Reframing knowledge, the knower, and knowing | 2019 | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Social Sciences | 4 | Autoethnography |
| 14 | Kiguwa | Negotiating the academy: Black bodies " out of place" | 2019 | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Psychology | 1 | Autoethnography |

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|----|---------------------|---|------|--|-------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------|
| 15 | Kiguwa & Segalo | Decolonising Psychology in residential and open distance e-learning institutions: critical reflections | 2018 | South African Journal of Psychology | Psychology | 2 | Conceptual study |
| 16 | Livingston | Transplanting the Fairy Tale: An Afrocentric Perspective | 2018 | Education as Change | Education: English curriculum | Not specified | Case study |
| 17 | Magoqwan a et al. | "Forced to care" at the Neoliberal University: Invisible Labour as Academic Labour Performed by Black Women Academics in the South African University | 2019 | South African Review of Sociology | Not specified | 3 | Autoethnographies |
| 18 | Mahabeer et al. | Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging Black women academics in Curriculum Studies at a university in South Africa | 2018 | Agenda | Curriculum studies/ Education | 3 | Narrative enquiry |
| 19 | Maistry & Le Grange | South African Higher Education as Mutating Plantation: Critical Reflections on Navigating a Racialized Space | 2023 | Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association | Not specified | 2 | Narrative enquiry |
| 20 | Mashiye et al. | Lecturer conceptions of and approaches to decolonisation of curricula in higher education | 2020 | South African Journal of Higher Education | Education | Not specified | Qualitative interpretivist surveys |
| 21 | Matthews | Decolonising while white: confronting race in a South African classroom | 2021 | Teaching in Higher Education | Political and International studies | 1 | Autoethnography |
| 22 | Mkhwanazi | What good is anthropology? | 2023 | Journal of the American Ethnological Society | Anthropology | 1 | Biographical commentary |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------|---|------|---|--------------------------|----|---------------------------------------|
| 23 | Morreira | Steps Towards Decolonial Higher Education in Southern Africa? Epistemic Disobedience in the Humanities | 2017 | Journal of Asian and African Studies | Anthropology & Education | 2 | Case study |
| 24 | Morreira et al. | Place and pedagogy: using space and materiality in teaching social science in Southern Africa | 2020 | Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal | Social Anthropology | 2 | Case study |
| 25 | Müller | A critical arts-based narrative of five educators working in higher education during an era of transformation in South Africa | 2018 | Journal of Education | Multiple | 5 | Narrative study |
| 26 | Nathane | Sitting on the bum: The struggle of survival and belonging for a black African woman in the academy | 2019 | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Not specified | 1 | Autoethnography |
| 27 | Phaswana | The limits of being and knowledge in the academy | 2019 | Book Chapter- Black academics: The South African experience | Developmental Studies | 1 | Autoethnography |
| 28 | Pillay & Swanepoel | An exploration of higher education teachers' experience of decolonising the Bachelor of Education honours curriculum | 2019 | Perspectives in Education | Education | 8 | Qualitative interpretivist case study |
| 29 | Pithouse-Morgan et al. | Sink or swim?: Learning from stories of becoming academics within a transforming university terrain | 2016 | South African Journal of Higher Education | Varied | 12 | Narrative inquiry |
| 30 | Sathorar & Geduld | Reflecting on lecturer dispositions to decolonise teacher education | 2019 | Journal of Education | Education | 20 | Narrative inquiry |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|----------------|--|------|---|---------------|----|--|
| 31 | Senekal & Lenz | Decolonising the South African Higher Education Curriculum: An investigation into the challenges | 2020 | International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies | Education | 9 | Qualitative interpretivist case study |
| 32 | Sibanda | Academics' conceptions of higher education decolonisation | 2021 | South African Journal of Higher Education | Education | 13 | Biographical commentary/ Conceptual |
| 33 | Waghid | Decolonising the African University again | 2021 | South African Journal of Higher Education | Not specified | 1 | Case study |

Thematic analysis

Stage 1: Coding text

Free line-by-line coding of the findings from the primary sources was done. Data was examined for meaning and content during coding. The codes were entered into an Excel sheet. This process allowed for the translation of codes and concepts between studies. Examples of codes used are:

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Defining decolonisation | Professional marginalisation | Financial constraints | Pedagogical innovation |
| Historical context | Emotional toll | Lack of leadership | Advocacy and activism |
| Curriculum transformation | Collegial support or isolation | Curricular rigidity | Network building |
| Knowledge production | Imposter syndrome | Fear of backlash | Critical self-reflection |
| Africanisation | Activism vs. scholarship | Racial tension | Precarity |
| Social justice | Institutional resistance | Curriculum redesign | Relationships |
| Identity politics/ conflict | Conservatism in academia | Collaboration | Role conflict |
| Institutional alienation | Perceived threats to standards | Mentorship and support | |

Stage 2: Developing descriptive themes

The codes were then examined and analysed for their meanings, and reorganised into related categories. Each category was analysed for its properties.

Stage 3: Generating analytical themes

Each category was examined and compared to other categories, specifically looking for similarities and differences. Similar categories was merged into higher level constructs and then themes, with the addition of subthemes.

| Key | Themes | Subthemes |
|-----|---|--|
| T1 | 1. Academics' Understanding of Decolonisation in Higher Education in South Africa | 1.1. Definitions and Interpretations |
| T2 | 2. Lived Experiences of Social Science Academics | 2.1 Identity, Belonging and Academic Agency 2.2 Mental Health and Well-being of Academics 2.3 Power Dynamics and Relationships 2.4 New Academics and Experiences of Precarity in the Academia |
| T3 | 3. Perceived Barriers to Decolonisation | 3.1 Institutional Resistance 3.2 Eurocentrism in Knowledge Production 3.3 Balancing Role Conflicts in Academia |
| T4 | 4. Strategies Employed by Academics for Decolonisation | 4.1 Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms 4.2 Collaboration and Community Building |

Analysis of collected data and findings

To understand the lived experiences of academics the focus was on the authors' personal engagement with decolonisation efforts, professional challenges and opportunities, emotional and psychological impact, cultural and identity-related reflections, pedagogical shifts, institutional dynamics, collaboration and solidarity, and reflections on academic knowledge production.

Using the interpretivist paradigm as a compass to guide this study on decolonisation efforts in higher education and the lived experiences of social science academics, the data analysis focused on understanding subjective meanings and experiences rather than objective truths, on the subjective and contextualised understanding of decolonisation, and recognising the nuanced, varied, and socially constructed nature of knowledge in different academic settings.

The analysis of collected data and the formation of results focused on how various academics interpret decolonisation in similar or distinct ways, depending on their personal, institutional, or regional contexts. It also focused on the role of collaborative relationships in decolonising the higher education spaces.

Characteristics of the 33 sources analysed are summarised in TABLE. 28 of the sources included were journal articles while 5 of the sources were book chapters from the book *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience*. To ensure the credibility of the included book, it was ensured that it fulfilled the following criteria: author expertise, peer reviewed, academic press, editorial

oversight, original research, topic relevance, and indexing and availability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Kulczycki, 2018; Liamputtong, 2019).

The articles and book chapters included in this study are located in multiple social science disciplines including theology, communication and media studies, psychology, sociology, education, history, political and international studies, anthropology, and developmental studies. To ensure that the focus is on the lived experiences of authors and participants, only qualitative studies were included. Thematic qualitative synthesis was used to identify the main themes from analysing academics' lived experiences as discussed in the autoethnographies, case studies, and narrative enquiries, included in this research. The number of participants in the studies used ranged from one (as many were autoethnographies) to 28. As the focus of the study is South Africa, no articles focusing on other geographical areas were included. The earliest article included was from 2016, which is significant as this was the time which the students protests happened. The most recent article included was from 2024. The decision to include this range was deliberate as it would indicate whether much has changed eight years after the renewed calls for decolonisation. The study purposefully included perspectives from different genders, races, and ages as well as various levels of employment and years of experience in academia.

Themes assigned to each reviewed source

| | Author(s) | Title | Year | Theme code |
|----|------------------------|--|------|------------------------------|
| 1 | Bell et al. | Retrospective Autoethnographies: A Call for Decolonial Imaginings for the New University | 2020 | 2.1; 3.1; 3.2 |
| 2 | Brunsdon | 'Selfishly backward' or 'selflessly forward?': A white male's insider perspective on a challenge and opportunity of decolonisation for practical theology in the South African context | 2019 | 2.1; 3.2 |
| 3 | Chasi | Don't teach me nonsense | 2019 | 2.3; 4.1 |
| 4 | Costandius et al. | #Feesmustfall and decolonising the curriculum: Stellenbosch university students' and lecturers' reactions | 2018 | 1.1; 2.1; 3.1 |
| 5 | Daniels et al. | South African new academics' experiences of precarity: Becoming and unbecoming the condition of coloniality through collective reflexivity | 2024 | 2.1; 2.2; 2.4; 3.1 |
| 6 | Frizelle | Troubling whiteness: A critical autoethnographic exploration of being white in the context of calls for the decolonisation | 2019 | 2.1; 3.2; |
| 7 | Garusta | An Autoethnography of the Feminist Pedagogical Strategies Used in Teaching and Learning to Promote Inclusive Classrooms | 2023 | 2.1; 2.3; 3.1; 4.1 |
| 8 | Hlatshwayo & Alexander | "We've been taught to understand that we don't have anything to contribute towards knowledge": Exploring academics' understanding of decolonising curricula in higher education | 2021 | 1.1; 3.2 |
| 9 | Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo | Are we there yet? An intersectional take on Black women academics' experiences in a South African university | 2023 | 2.1; 2.3; 2.4 |
| 10 | Jawitz | Unearthing white academics' experience of teaching in higher education in SA | 2016 | 2.1 |
| 11 | Joubert & Clarence | 'I just feel very dispensable': Exploring the connections between precarity and identity for academic literacy developers | 2024 | 2.4 |
| 12 | Kgari-Masondo | In pursuit of a decolonised history teacher: Agency and boldness in fostering change | 2020 | 2.1; 4.1 |
| 13 | Khunou et al. | Black in the academy: Reframing knowledge, the knower, and knowing | 2019 | 2.1 |
| 14 | Kiguwa | Negotiating the academy: Black bodies "out of place" | 2019 | 2.1; 2.3 |
| 15 | Kiguwa & Segalo | Decolonising Psychology in residential and open distance e-learning institutions: critical reflections | 2018 | 4.1 |
| 16 | Livingston | Transplanting the Fairy Tale: An Afrocentric Perspective | 2018 | 3.2 |
| 17 | Magqwana et al. | "Forced to care" at the Neoliberal University: Invisible Labour as Academic Labour Performed by Black Women Academics in the South African University | 2019 | 2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 3.1; 3.3; 4.2 |
| 18 | Mahabeer et al. | Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging Black women academics in Curriculum Studies at a university in South Africa | 2018 | 2.1; 3.3 |
| 19 | Maistry & Le Grange | South African Higher Education as Mutating Plantation: Critical Reflections on Navigating a Racialized Space | 2023 | 2.1; 3.1 |
| 20 | Mashiye et al. | Lecturer conceptions of and approaches to decolonisation of curricula in higher education | 2020 | 1.1; 3.2 |
| 21 | Matthews | Decolonising while white: confronting race in a South African classroom | 2021 | 2.1 |
| 22 | Mkhwanazi | What good is anthropology? | 2023 | 2.2; 3.1 |
| 23 | Morreira | Steps Towards Decolonial Higher Education in Southern Africa? Epistemic Disobedience in the Humanities | 2017 | 3.1; 4.2 |
| 24 | Morreira et al. | Place and pedagogy: using space and materiality in teaching social science in Southern Africa | 2020 | 4.1 |
| 25 | Müller | A critical arts-based narrative of five educators working in higher education during an era of transformation in South Africa | 2018 | 2.1; 2.2 |
| 26 | Nathane | Sitting on the bum: The struggle of survival and belonging for a black African woman in the academy | 2019 | 2.1; 2.3; 3.3 |
| 27 | Phaswana | The limits of being and knowledge in the academy | 2019 | 2.1; 3.2; 4.1 |
| 28 | Pillay & Swanepoel | An exploration of higher education teachers' experience of decolonising the Bachelor of Education honours curriculum | 2019 | 1.1 |
| 29 | Pithouse-Morgan et al. | Sink or swim?: Learning from stories of becoming academics within a transforming university terrain | 2016 | 2.3; 2.4 |
| 30 | Sathorar & Geduld | Reflecting on lecturer dispositions to decolonise teacher education | 2019 | 1.1 |
| 31 | Senekal & Lenz | Decolonising the South African Higher Education Curriculum: An investigation into the challenges | 2020 | 1.1; 3.2; 3.1 |
| 32 | Sibanda | Academics' conceptions of higher education decolonisation | 2021 | 1.1; 3.2 |
| 33 | Waghid | Decolonising the African University again | 2021 | 2.1; 3.1; 3.2 |