

Examining the Dynamics of Belonging and Alienation in Higher Education Through Photovoice

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Abstract

The higher education system globally is inherently inequitable. Discriminatory practices and oppressive power dynamics are particularly prevalent in the South African higher education landscape which is characterised by a legacy of colonialism and apartheid. As a result, although students from a wide range of backgrounds are increasingly participating in higher education, many students who do not fit the dominant status quo question their belonging within these spaces. Students' experiences of alienation within higher education can have profoundly negative physical, psycho-social and education outcomes. However, students also display agency in negotiating the exclusionary institutional cultures within their universities and succeeding despite these experiences. Photovoice methodology can be a useful tool for critiquing and highlighting such agentic practices, and for foregrounding the voices of students. In this research brief, we reflect on two photovoice projects that sought to examine the complexity of students' experiences of belonging and alienation in higher education in South Africa. Our findings illustrate that although students may experience alienation on campus, they may also create spaces of belonging, and 'speak back' to, and challenge the exclusions inherent to campus life.

Keywords: Photovoice, higher education, South Africa, students, belonging, alienation, mental health, agency, race, LGBTQIA, visual methods

Introduction

Since the establishment of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the national government has introduced policies to redress the colonial and apartheid oppressions entrenched within the higher education system. However, despite the widening participation of more diverse students, exclusionary practices persist at many universities (Badat, 2016; Vincent, 2015). At the University of Cape Town (UCT) – a historically ‘white only’ South African university – the dominant experience for many black, LGTBIAQ+, working-class students, and students with disabilities is still often one of marginalization (Boonzaier & Mkhize, 2018; Kessi & Cornell, 2015; Koyana, 2017). This exclusionary institutional culture has been dominant across all faculties, including the Faculty of Health Sciences which is responsible for producing a number of the health professionals working in South Africa today. Producing graduates who are equipped to deal with the nuanced health needs of this country requires thinking critically about the transformation of the educational contexts in which graduates are trained.

Structural inequalities in the higher education system in South Africa, and indeed within higher education globally, have detrimental consequences for the mental health of many of the students who do not fit the dominant status quo. Research suggests that students’ experiences of marginalisation in education can profoundly impact their psychological and physical wellbeing, and educational outcomes (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). In South Africa, studies have reported elevated risk of suicidal ideation among “women, Black, disabled, non-first-generation students, and those reporting atypical sexual orientations” (Bantjies et al., 2017, p. 2). Indeed, suicidal ideation among university students is significantly higher than the general population more broadly, as well as university students in other countries (Bantjies et al., 2017). It is vital to conduct work that highlights and

challenges the implicit exclusionary practices within universities in order to improve students' mental health.

At the same time, it is also important to consider students' agency within the power relations that structure higher education settings. Increasingly, researchers are considering how students cope with or resist experiences of marginalisation, create spaces of belonging, and display agency in their negotiation of exclusionary campus environments (Kapp & Bangeni, 2020; Ong, Smith, & Ko, 2018; Walker & Mathebula, 2020).

When considering how students resist marginalisation and exclusion in higher education, Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodologies, such as photovoice, have much to offer. Photovoice is able to capture rich detail about the people, processes, and contexts in educational settings (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006) and make explicit what is often unknown, unspoken or tacit (Howes & Miles, 2015). As a whole, participatory, action-oriented visual research methods offer a compelling way to unpack the dominant cultural norms underlying many of the processes and practices in higher education. In this research brief, to illustrate how students use photo-stories to reflect on their experiences, we provide a broad overview of six years of photovoice research conducted at UCT. Although here we devote greater attention to findings from the second photovoice project in a series of two, we show how photovoice can be used to explore students' experiences of marginalisation and belonging relating different categories of intersecting identities, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

Methods

The photovoice work has comprised two distinct but interconnected projects, the one building on the work of the former and responding to the specific contextual developments happening at the University at the time. The first photovoice project took place between 2013-2015 prior

and post the wave of student protests calling for the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. This project examined black students' experiences of transformation at UCT, in relation to race and the intersection of race and other categories of identity such as gender, class, and sexuality. The main objective was to investigate how students who call for a decolonised university envision the future transformed university. The second photovoice project took place between 2018-2020 examining the experiences of students of all races, and in particular, the impact of material space on students' identities.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants for the first photovoice project comprised 36 black¹ students (23 women, nine men, and four students who do not identify with binary gender categories). In the second photovoice project, 24 racially heterogeneous students participated (18 women and 6 men). Students were recruited through the Department of Psychology's Student Research Participation Programme (SRPP)² and word-of-mouth. Additionally, in order to ensure representation from students from a diversity of sexualities and gender identities, purposive sampling was used and UCT's LGBTQIA+ student organisations, the Rainbow Society and the Transcollective, were approached to invite students to participate.

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

Ethical approval for the photovoice projects was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at UCT and by the University of South Africa's (Unisa) College

1 'Black' here refers to students from the apartheid-era race categories of 'Black African', 'coloured' and 'Indian'.

2 SRPP is a points system used to facilitate student involvement as participants in the research activities of the Department of Psychology. Undergraduate students are encouraged to sign up as participants for research studies, for which they receive points for their final course grades. Participation is not compulsory, and students may undertake other research tasks instead, however, we acknowledge that this system inevitably comes with particular power dynamics.

of Graduate Studies Research Ethics Review Committee. For the second project, approval was also granted by the Department of Student Affairs (DSA) at UCT for permission to access students for research purposes (this was not a requirement at the time of the first project).

The first author, Josephine Cornell, was – for most of the research process – a postgraduate student at UCT. Her Master’s thesis formed part of the first photovoice project and the second photovoice project was a component of her doctoral study. The second author, Shose Kessi, is an academic at UCT who ran the first photovoice project and supervised Josephine’s postgraduate research. Shose is an activist-scholar and social psychologist who has worked closely with students around issues of transformation at UCT for many years. The third author, Kopano Ratele, is an academic from an outside university who has worked extensively on issues of sexuality, gender and race and who co-lead a component of the first project in 2015 and co-supervised Josephine’s doctoral dissertation.

Focus Group Discussions

Both projects began with focus group discussions to prompt students to reflect on their experiences at UCT. In the focus groups in the first project, students were asked to reflect on the state of transformation of higher education in South Africa and to share their personal experiences of what it is like to be a black student at UCT. They were also asked what they understood by the terms “transformation” and “decolonisation”; to describe how they imagine a decolonised university; and to reflect on what they could do to change the university. In the second project focus groups, students were asked about the spaces they spend time in on campus; whether they thought campus space had been transformed since the dismantling of apartheid; and to reflect on what changes they would make to campus spaces.

These focus groups provided a first opportunity for students to share experiences, find moments of solidarity, and learn from each other's perspectives.

Personal Reflections

In the first photovoice project, after participants had attended the focus groups, they were asked to write a personal reflection (of approximately 500 words) about their experiences at UCT. In the second photovoice project, because of the key focus on space in the study, the participants were asked instead to draw reflective mental maps depicting their experience of space on campus. More specifically, the participants were requested to document how they use, perceive, and feel within the different campus spaces using drawing and writing.

Photography Training

In both photovoice projects, following the initial focus group discussion, participants attended a training workshop with a professional photographer on the practical use of cameras, the more stylistic elements of photography such as composition and lighting, and photographic ethics. These training sessions were also spaces to reflect on the significance of representation as a political act, as well as the ethics of representing people and symbols in humanizing ways. Participants were also asked during these training sessions to reflect further on the themes that arose in the focus groups and how they would represent these in photographs.

Photo-Story Sharing Sessions and Exhibitions

Thereafter, participants were loaned digital cameras to use for the duration of the projects and were asked to produce 5-6 photographs and captions, which we termed 'photo-stories', reflecting on their everyday experiences at the University, focusing specifically on scenes of

transformation/decolonisation and/or the lack thereof. The particular form these photo-stories took was left up to the participants' preference and creativity. Typically, they either comprised a series of connected photographs and captions covering a single topic, or distinct photographs and captions covering different themes. After the students had completed their photo-stories, they presented their stories to the project group, and a discussion was held around the themes that emerged across the stories, with participants discussing commonalities and differences in their experience. This stage was important in the development of students' critical consciousness and understanding that their particular experiences of campus were not isolated and individual incidents – but based on broader structural issues. We also invited other scholar-activists from the university to these sessions to engage with the students and provide critical constructive feedback on their photo-stories.

Exhibitions are a key aspect of the photovoice process. Participants were asked to select which photo-stories they would like to include in the exhibition. The photographs were printed and mounted on boards with captions and headings and displayed on easels. All exhibitions took place in public spaces on campus that see a high volume of student and staff foot traffic (e.g. the foyers of various University buildings) and after an initial exhibition opening, were left up for approximately 1 to 2 months. Participants were involved in the decision-making around the exhibition logistics, such as when to host the exhibition, how to arrange the exhibition space, what to name the exhibition and who to invite to the exhibition launch. The launches were attended by the participants, other students, university staff, and members of the public.

Participants who were interested were invited to speak at the exhibition openings. The first exhibition titled, “The Land of Milk and Hani: Artworks by UCT Students” was held in October 2013; a second exhibition launch was held in October 2015 and was titled, “Body: A Photovoice Exhibition by UCT Students”. The final exhibition launch, titled “Who am I at

UCT?” was held in October 2018. The exhibitions were also used subsequently as part of different events happening on campus and limited collections of the photographs were exhibited across the different university campuses as part of a traveling exhibit in subsequent years, and printed in a hardcopy photobook.

Findings

Analyses of the findings from the first photovoice project have been discussed elsewhere (see Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Cornell, Ratele & Kessi, 2016; Kessi & Cornell, 2015). We focus here on two examples from the second project to demonstrate the use of their photo-stories with students to reflect on their experiences of marginalisation as well as belonging on the university campus. Specifically, we present photo-stories from Zoliswa³, who is “black, queer and a traditionalist” and Ella, a “white female, wheelchair user”, as per their own self-descriptions.

Zoliswa’s Story: The Complexity of Belonging and Alienation

In Zoliswa’s photo-stories she documents her experiences of both alienation and belonging on campus. She begins the story by describing the disjunction between her identity and the dominant institutional culture of the University (“My existence could never be captured in a space that actively sought to exclude me”, “I looked over it, from above it but I still couldn’t resonate with it”). In the accompanying photograph, she represents this alienation by depicting the back of her head as she looks out over the UCT Campus from above. In response to the alienation Zoliswa experiences on campus, she withdraws into the space of belonging she constructs for herself on campus, where she spends time with her partner, as depicted in Figure 1 below:

³ All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

However, tension is evident in Zoliswa’s photo-story between agency, exclusion, and power. Although her sense of alienation on campus, and the disjunction between her identity as a black, queer person from the rural areas and the dominant institutional norms of the University, force her to “retreat behind closed doors”, her space of retreat is a student faculty office where she holds a leadership position. Zoliswa has clearly achieved many measures of a successful student experience, such as meaningful relationships with other students and recognition within student leadership structures. Her photo-story illustrates the complexity of students’ experiences of belonging and alienation, which may occur simultaneously.

Ella’s Story: Speaking back to Ableism on Campus

In Ella’s photo-stories, she documents her experience of navigating campus as a wheelchair user. Many of Ella’s photo-stories involve a direct ‘talking back’ to ableism on campus. Ella produced, for example, a number of photo-stories in which she documents how people frequently block her routes on campus, such as Figure 2 below:

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

In these photo-stories, when Ella directly, emotively and “somewhat sarcastically”, addresses an imagined UCT audience to catalogue their performances of ableism, she makes ableism explicitly visible (Dolmage, 2017). Ella directly highlights the role that other students and staff frequently play – along with the material campus environment – in the co-constitution of an exclusionary campus environment for wheelchair users. Through her photo-stories, Ella is able to problematise the *disabling* academic environment rather than

take on a disabled student identity, and highlight the responsibility of the institution – rather than of students such as Ella herself – in addressing ableism.

Implications and Conclusion

As with many forms of PAR, it can at times be difficult to measure the wider impact of the study on institutional policy. However, in the course of this photovoice research we have seen how the exhibitions can offer students the opportunity to speak directly to policy makers, such as university deans and vice chancellors. Indeed, participants in our research in the past have taken ownership of the photo-stories they produced and used them outside of the photovoice exhibition in their own forms of student activism on campus. The photo-stories from the first project, for example, were put on display– at the participants’ request – as part of the UCT Student Representative Council’s (SRC) Race Dialogue forum discussing racism on campus. The students participating in the forum used the exhibited stories to reflect on, connect with, and share their own experiences of racism on campus. We also presented our work at various other forums across campus in 2014 during which much interest was garnered about a photo-story of the Cecil John Rhodes statue. Student leaders have shared with us that this ignited conversations about the statue leading up to the RhodesMustFall campaign in March 2015 and the eventual removal of the statue.

In our experience of doing this work, we have seen the establishment of committees and working groups to promote changes in the culture of our institution (see Kessi, 2019). For example, one of the participants in the first photovoice project – inspired by his involvement in the project – was encouraged to publish an op ed piece reflecting on the stigmatising representations of black people in the artwork displayed on campus. This op ed in part inspired establishment of the Artworks Task Team (ATT) which was responsible for auditing the statues, plaques, and artworks on campus that “may be seen to recognise or

celebrate colonial oppressors and/or which may be offensive or controversial” (see UCT, 2016). Indeed, the photo-stories produced by our participants have often generated insight, consternation, and change. As such, photo-stories can be invaluable to policy makers and those in positions of power within the education system who would do well to pay attention to the perspectives of students. This is particularly important regarding those students from certain categories of identity that have historically faced much marginalisation in education spaces. Photovoice, with its emphasis on the elucidation of students’ voices can be a valuable tool in this regard.

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Figures

Figure 1: Sample photo-story from photovoice participant (Zoliswa)



***Caption:** So, I retreated behind closed doors, to my space of comfort. My little home...she became my home. My ray of sunshine interrupted! It was the stillness in her eyes that calmed the raging storm within me.*

Figure 2: Sample photo-story from photovoice participant (Ella)



***Caption:** The visibility of this parking marker seems like an accurate metaphor for the amount of people that respect the parking rules and don't make life harder by making us late/miss class due to blocked routes (ramps are there to look pretty?) or force us to use routes in ways that put our health at risk ... Thanks...I love that I with a muscle disease that literally lose muscle mass daily...am forced to strain my back and shoulders to such an extent daily that I actually have biceps... this just means I have stronger muscles pulling my back into spasms and knots. Yay.*