

FILLING A THEORETICAL VOID: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF “COLOURED” WOMEN AS MATHEMATICS EDUCATORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to intense prohibition and regulation of access to higher education during apartheid, a significant number of teachers from historically marginalised groups did not necessarily enter the profession as a first choice or as a desirable profession. Instead, post-schooling choices were based on access and financial support, restricting many marginalised groups to enrol at teacher training colleges. Beyond schools, there were no career pathways for “coloured”, “black”, and “Indian” teachers to teach at a higher education level. In mathematics education, the challenges experienced by “coloured” women are especially pronounced yet unexplored. To date, the dominant literature has leaned towards a negative portrayal, informed by stereotypical imagery and caricature. By exploring the lived experiences of six “coloured” women, who succeeded in establishing themselves as mathematics educators in higher education, the article is driven by a twofold imperative. On the one hand, it seeks to highlight the intersectional barriers of discrimination and marginalisation encountered by these women during apartheid and democratic South Africa. On the other hand, the article is interested in filling the theoretical void on the lives and capabilities of “coloured” women as mathematics educators in higher education.

Keywords: “coloured” women, identity, Critical Race Theory, lived experiences, mathematics educators, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The success of apartheid depended on more than just racial segregation; it relied heavily on entrenching inequalities and inequities by prohibiting and regulating access to education. This was as evident in its construction of nineteen racially and ethnically designated education departments as it was in its establishment of universities for black students – deliberately located in impoverished rural areas with limited social infrastructure and amenities and far

removed from the political militancy and influences of large cities (Badat 1999). “Black”, “coloured”, and “Indian” students, wishing to pursue an academic programme not offered at their racially designated institutions, were required to seek special permission, and of course, find the necessary funding – a scarce resource in a society intentionally designed towards the economic disenfranchisement of all those who were not “white”. That historically excluded and marginalised students continue to fight for access well into South Africa’s (SA) democracy sheds significant light on the vast success of apartheid’s diabolical policies. The experiences of “black”, “Indian”, and “coloured” students testify to its effect – they traversed particular racially defined and predetermined career paths; that is, if they were “privileged” enough to have the option of considering post-schooling pursuits in the first place. This study recognises that in light of the hierarchical construction of apartheid’s racial and racist categorisations of first “white”, followed by “Indian”, “coloured” and “black”, the kinds of oppression and its combined effects with economic disempowerment impacted variously on these different categorisations. The decision to focus our research on the lived experiences of “coloured” women as mathematics educators should not be interpreted as an attempt to dismiss or reduce the experiences of other marginalised groups or individuals.

There is increasing literature about challenges experienced by historically marginalised groups in higher education (Loots, Ts’ephe, and Walker 2016; Rosenberg 2016) and, in particular, women in higher education (Ramohai 2019; Divala 2014). The current literature of “coloured” women either highlights the personal and social challenges by exposing their vulnerabilities in their communities (Moffett 2006; Pitpitan et al. 2016; Sawyer-Kurian, Wechsberg, and Luseno 2009) or focuses on “coloured” students’ personal struggles about race and gender stereotyping in higher education spaces (Daniels and Damons 2011; Snyder 2014). There is a dearth in the literature regarding “coloured” women as educators in higher education in South Africa, neglecting their experiences and contribution in the spaces of higher education.

This article spotlights the lived experiences of six “coloured” women passionate about mathematics who, under overt racial and gendered discrimination during apartheid, made inroads into mathematics education post-apartheid. In privileging the narratives of “coloured” women, the study is available to advance first-hand accounts, thereby contributing to the theoretical gaps in their experiences in mathematics education in higher education. We start by looking at the category of “coloured” as a racial marker. Using Critical Race Theory as our theoretical framework, we continue by providing a detailed exploration of the challenges and barriers encountered by the women as they strive towards their careers as mathematic educators during apartheid and democracy.

A “COLOURED” IDENTITY – DISMANTLING THE MYTHS

The phrase, “people of colour”, explains Sumpter (2008, 19), was coined during the slave trade, particularly in New Orleans in Southern Louisiana during the colonial periods of the French (1682–1763) and the Spanish (1763–1800). While the descriptor, “people of colour”, is widely used in America, the term “coloured” is seemingly unique to a Southern African context. During the 1600s, the Dutch colonialists renamed the Khoe as Hottentot and the San as Bushmen (Van Wyk 2016). Instead of embracing the Khoisan-Euro-slave heterogeneous persons, explains Richards (2017, 219), the colonialists preferred to “marginalise, reject and bastardise” them.

By the time the British replaced the Dutch, the term “coloured” had become embedded in colonial rule’s socioeconomic and political rhetoric in the Cape Colony. The term was constructed to identify people who originated from European and African ancestry (and later Asian). Unlike the American context, the term “coloured” in SA does not infer “black in dominant discourses, historically and contemporaneously”, as is the case of women of colour in America (Erasmus 2017, 21). However, the historical, geographical and political differences between the terminologies of “people of colour” and “coloured people” have not prevented wanton and derogatory associations. As was the case in other parts of Southern Africa, Europeans associated people of mixed ancestry with inferiority, illegitimacy and shame (Erasmus 2017, 78).

Both the category of “coloured” and its disparaging association continued into apartheid SA, where it was abused for renewed exertions of oppression and othering – better than “blacks” but inferior to “whites”. For women, the associations are especially pronounced and humiliating. “Women of colour” or “coloured women” are described as “incompetent, powerless, invisible, inferior, lazy, voiceless, sexually submissive, sexually brazen, irrelevant, welfare queens, [and] unfit mothers” (Wing 2003, 1). Remarkably, post-apartheid SA has retained the same racial categorisations, as well as the misplaced associated misrepresentations. Much has been written about “coloured” identities in SA (Besten 2009; Strauss 2009; Hammett 2010; Adhikari 2009; Erasmus 2001); the identities of “coloured” women are depicted in slandered and sexualised imagery (Sawyer-Kurian et al. 2009; Pitpitan et al. 2016). Jansen and Walters’ (2020) analysis of the last century’s literature about “coloured” women (and men) at a historically “white” university identifies five prominent themes in the literature: “intimate”, “decrepit”, “pitiful” and “criminal” lives and drinking habits. It demonstrates derogatory representations of “coloured” women (and men). Their misrecognition remains prominent in the 21st century (Jansen and Walters 2020), which encourages discrimination and exclusion.

RESTRICTED EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

For historically marginalised groups, post-schooling educational opportunities were predominantly restricted to the humanities, social sciences and education (Anderson 2003). While bursaries were available from the apartheid state, these were restricted to teaching and nursing professions at colleges and technikons.

Unlike teaching in schools, access to teaching in higher education was especially cumbersome for historically marginalised women. Post-apartheid research has increasingly begun to interrogate and report on the lived experiences of “black” women in higher education (Maseti 2018; Madileng 2014; Ramohai 2019). Common to these studies reflect the external and internal barriers to accessing certain positions in higher education and then struggling to find the necessary support, mentoring, and a sense of belonging in succeeding in those positions. In turn, research on “coloured” women has mainly focused on their particular challenges and vulnerabilities within their communities (Dada et al. 2018; Pitpitan et al. 2016; Sawyer-Kurian et al. 2009). Other studies have looked at the challenging experiences of “coloured” female undergraduate and postgraduate university students, emphasising the students’ struggles with their insecurities around race and gender stereotyping (Snyder 2014; Daniels and Damons 2011). While these studies provide some insight into experiences of the de-legitimisation of skills, knowledge and expertise, very little is known about the particular experiences of “coloured” women in higher education in SA.

Knowledge for mathematics teaching in SA is complex (Adler and Davis 2006). Historically, university qualifications in mathematics education consisted of tertiary-level mathematics followed by theories (and some application) of teaching mathematics at the secondary school level – qualifications at teacher training colleges comprised primary-level mathematics (amongst other school subjects) and didactics. Following the turn to democracy, there was a surge of short courses to upskill in-service teachers, which, as Adler and Davis (2006) point out, became an accumulation of knowledge of mathematics instead of an “unpacking” of the requirements for mathematics teaching (Ball, Hill, and Bass 2005). “Unpacking” the knowledge required to teach mathematics cannot be achieved without understanding the marginalised and discriminated lives of those involved in mathematics education.

Of the six women whose lived experiences informed this study, four attended teacher training colleges, and two attended universities. Five of the six women continued their tertiary studies at universities, while one extended her qualifications at a Technikon. Having qualified (and taught) at varied educational settings in the democracy, they would have come to their respective professions with different understandings of themselves and teaching mathematics.

In this regard, the research fills two theoretical voids: the lived experiences of six “coloured” women as they lived and sought education through apartheid and into a democracy, and their particular experiences to become mathematics educators.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AS A “HEARER” OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

Often knowledge about “coloured” women relies on Western theories that speak on their behalf, denying them opportunities to share the catalysts and hindrances that influenced their lives (Hendricks 2018; Pillay 2018; Erasmus 2017) and denying the recognition they feel they deserve (Honneth 2007). Western perspectives misrecognise those historically marginalised, which, Taylor (1994, 125) avers, can be damaging to identities. Furthermore, when negative images become internalised, it can seem impossible to improve one’s life even when the barriers to improvement are removed. Identity and misrecognition are therefore intricately related, and disrupting misrecognition means acknowledging marginalised voices.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers an alternative to Western theories, ensuring that historically marginalised voices are brought to the fore. It gives voice to those silenced and excluded from contributing towards knowledge about themselves and their realities. For “coloured” women, CRT allows their unheard voices to become new theories of knowledge. (Ladson-Billings 1998; Solorzano and Yosso 2001; Zamudio et al. 2011; Yosso 2005; Dixon and Rousseau 2005). Thus far, their particular lived experiences as unequal citizens, subjected to systemic discrimination, marginalisation, and exclusion, have not been recorded or considered. Inasmuch as these women share a similar racial categorisation, their experiences are by no means homogenous – not in how they experienced apartheid or democracy and not in how they conceive of themselves as mathematics educators in higher education. Their narratives are helpful to “unpack” barriers encountered when individuals are forced to live lives deemed less-than.

MEETING THE WOMEN

Interpretative and phenomenological research paradigms were appropriate for this study to delve into the multiple perspectives and multi-layeredness of lives (Babbie and Mouton 2001; Cresswell 2014). Six “coloured” women’s lived experiences were encapsulated in a single case study with embedded units and contextual variables assigned to professional roles and higher education sites (Yin 2014). Ethical clearance was sought, and all research protocols adhered to.

Finding willing participants presented unexpected difficulties. On the one hand, due to the intricate restrictions imposed on historically marginalised groups, there are a limited number of “coloured” women employed as mathematics educators in higher education. On the other hand,

the political burdening and misrepresentation associated with a classification of “coloured” led to some women refusing to participate in the study. Following a purposive sampling strategy, six “coloured” female mathematics educators who had pursued mathematics education participated in the study. Their ages ranged between fifty and sixty-three years old; all of them grew up during apartheid, lived in racially segregated areas, and attended schools designated for “coloured” learners. At the time of the study, three participants were employed at historically disadvantaged universities, two at historically advantaged universities and one at a non-government organisation (NGO) affiliated with a university. Recounting lived experiences brought about painful memories of forced removals and arrests of family members and their banning orders for some. As the interviews proceeded, others came to understand their hardships on personal and professional levels.

The central interest of the study is to gain insights into the lived experiences of the women as they made their way towards becoming mathematics educators in higher education during apartheid and into democracy. Firstly, we wanted to learn about their particular experiences of being labelled as “coloured” – what this meant for them in their homes, schools, educational opportunities and prospects. Secondly, we wanted to get a sense of their understandings and memories of race and racism and how this influenced how they conceived of themselves. Thirdly, we were interested in how a democracy influenced their career opportunities, support and challenges in mathematics education. Following, we wanted their opinions about how the label of “coloured” influenced their becoming of mathematics educators and if the label mattered in post-apartheid SA.

MEMORIES OF RACE AND RACISM DURING APARTHEID

The women in this study recalled different racial awakenings, encounters and conflicts instilled in their minds at young ages. Anoushka’s strength as an athlete allowed her to participate in inter-provincial events, including a cross-section of learners. What she remembers most, however, was the range of sporting accessories of “white” athletes, leaving her feeling inadequate and less-than. Her account brings evidence to racialised inequities across schools during apartheid (Dixson and Rousseau 2005). Danah’s especially dark skin that subjected her to cruel patterns of “bullying and persecution” is an example of the permanence of racism, creating a long-lasting, deep sense of inferiority, which she ascribes to her introverted nature. In turn, Aisha and Esmerelda recall being raised to be fearful of blacks. Aisha, for example, was instructed to cover her mouth whenever she spoke to “black” people, in case they tried to steal her teeth for witchcraft. She shared that she spent most of her childhood believing these blatant racist absurdities, using fear to propagate racism, othering, and misrecognition. Race

and racism were already present before the young women understood their meanings and implications.

EXPERIENCES OF A “COLOURED” IDENTITY DURING APARTHEID

While common as a racial (mis)marker to the six women, the experience and implications of a “coloured” identity as the young women came face-to-face with the reality of apartheid provoked different tensions and hindrances. For Danah, it represented a geographical displacement. When she was nine years old, her parents relocated to Cape Town to be closer to her maternal grandmother. However, after residing with her for a few months, they were forcibly removed and relocated to a “coloured” township. Her family did not resist; they took the best option to keep the family together and safe, choosing a newly formed township instead of an established socioeconomically deprived residential offer. They were unaware that, in time, their chosen township would become as socially deprived as the other. The cruel intentions of apartheid displaced “coloureds” in areas of socioeconomic deprivation. Given a choice, nobody would choose to live, socialise and be schooled in squalor. However, by taking advantage of families needing to remain together and leading them to believe that they had a choice and were taking the better option, the apartheid regime engineered separation and segregation of areas.

For Anoushka, the identity of “coloured” signalled a severing of her stepfather from his family. While Anoushka’s mother was “coloured”, her stepfather was “white”. Thanks to the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act 55 (Union of South Africa 1949), they could not marry and live together with different racial classifications. Her stepfather’s decision to renounce his “white” classification led to a strained relationship with his family – no doubt an act of shame (Erasmus 2017). Overheard conversations between her parents made it known that her stepfather’s family did not accept their marriage. As a result, her mother would never accompany her stepfather on visits to his family, creating deepening rifts in the family. Anoushka gained a deep respect for her stepfather’s decision. She recognised the effect his decision had on his family and his efforts at forming loving, familial relationships across racial lines. The apartheid regime neglected that falling in and out of love is a normal part of life. Contrary to the typical depiction of “coloured” women identities as sexualised and wanton beings (Sawyer-Kurian et al. 2009; Pitpitan et al. 2016), a caring, loving, and supportive wife and children were not ashamed of their husband and (step)father. Their shared love and happiness as a family unit were more important. Legislation ran deep into the veins of communities – it disrupted and severed family relations, and it did so at the expense of othering “coloured” women, treated as if they had wronged “white” men through marriage.

Esmerelda’s experience of a “coloured” identity in a rural town meant leaving her family

to pursue secondary schooling. Rural towns only provided primary schooling for “coloured” children. Her parents suggested she live with family in Cape Town. Unlike her rural home town, living in a “coloured” township was hard. It was overpopulated and socioeconomic conditions were poor. Esmerelda thought she was privileged to be at a secondary school and should bear the brunt of the state’s oppressive conditions in the township. Sharing the same language, “white” Afrikaners and “coloureds” in rural areas had been oppressed under colonial rule. After the Afrikaners’ political victory in 1948, they required the means to differentiate themselves from the “coloured” population; one way was through limiting the education of “coloureds” to primary school. Secondary school education was considered a privilege in rural “coloured” communities, and accessing this privilege came at a considerable personal and financial cost to “coloured” families. Relocating to a new town for secondary school education would have several challenges for any young teenager. However, to maintain apartheid ideology, “coloured” (teenagers) were portrayed as lazy and pitiful beings (Jansen and Walters 2020). Given the opportunity, “coloured” teenage girls (and boys) had to be brave enough to leave their families behind to access secondary school education and take extraordinary steps to be successful at it.

Carmen’s experiences bring us face-to-face with sheer horror and fear of living in an apartheid state. Her “deeply political” upbringing shaped her belief in equality for all human beings. “I grew up with not seeing colour as a disabler or as anything strange. People were just people.” She was aware of her family’s confrontations with the law because the regime’s special forces often targeted their family home to either search for anti-apartheid evidence or check if relatives followed their banning orders. “[We were] sort of rejected by other people in society because everyone was scared to be associated with someone that could label them as being anti-government. People were scared of what could happen, and so, the family was seen as sort of different.” Breaking the regime’s laws not only meant facing imprisonment but also brought experiences of duress and intimidation in the privacy of homes, creating fear within communities of giving the police impressions of participation in criminal activities. It also meant that families were not permitted to socialise beyond their immediate family.

ESTABLISHING CAREER PATHS IN EDUCATION DURING APARTHEID

Apartheid determined post-schooling opportunities by offering financial assistance to study teaching or nursing. While bursaries were welcomed by many, they were a means to limit careers by race. For the six women, advancing their education and careers meant being open to whatever opportunities came their way; post-schooling education was understood as a success within each of their families.

Esmerelda and Aisha were eager to complete their secondary schooling, qualify as teachers and become employed to contribute toward their parents’ financial needs. They opted to complete their schooling with junior certificates (Grade 10), qualifying as lower primary teachers. Signing up for state bursaries meant that they were indebted to the state; both repaid in services, discarding any full-time study prospects. However, upper primary teaching required a senior certificate. Esmerelda and Aisha studied part-time for additional twelve and twenty-two years to qualify as upper primary teachers. Had they remained in school for another two years to obtain their senior certificates (Grade 10), they would have reduced the financial and timely costs of studying part-time. The apartheid regime intended to delay qualifications that would advance qualifications of “coloured” women by not offering bursaries or full-time study, deliberately making it difficult to accomplish.

Unlike Esmerelda and Aisha, Anoushka, Danah, Bernita and Carmen completed their secondary school senior certificates. Neither Anoushka nor Danah’s families could afford to send them to university, and, with the assistance of a state bursary, they pursued a college education, and consequently, kept most “coloured” women teachers out of secondary school teaching. While Bernita had a career dream of being a veterinary surgeon, she, too, bore the brunt of a denied career reserved for “whites” and settled for mathematics education.

The well-known political activism of Carmen’s family prevented her from obtaining a placement at the university of her choice. She was, however, offered a placement elsewhere, which she declined because “[she] was not going to a university [created] for ‘coloured’ people”. Instead, she pursued post-schooling lectures at the South African Committee on Higher Education (SACHED), a politically banned organisation at the time. SACHED provided an educational space that permitted political debates and readings, continuing the education she obtained at home, where many activists participated in anti-apartheid debates. Any alternative education that exposed the brutality of the state was done underground and without university accreditation. Alongside her politicised education, Carmen had no choice but to obtain an undergraduate qualification from a correspondence government university.

MAKING INROADS INTO MATHEMATICS EDUCATION POST-APARTHEID

Each of the women acquired a passion for mathematics by engaging with its content, which they found interesting and challenging. Aisha was an outstanding mathematics teacher and sought mathematics leadership positions at her school of employment. She was appointed as deputy principal, taking her away from her love, mathematics, so she looked for opportunities elsewhere. When an international publisher approached Aisha to contribute towards writing book chapters for the first national mathematics textbook in SA, Aisha seized the opportunity.

It was her chance to re-engage with her passion. Alongside her new role as an author, an NGO nominated her to enrol for a Further Diploma in Education (FDE) for mathematics teaching, and she was keen to participate. One of the prerequisites to the programme was to deliver nationwide teacher workshops and report the quality of the materials delivered. Within this space, Aisha began her journey as a mathematics educator.

Carmen was earmarked as a prominent classroom-based mathematics researcher by internationally acclaimed visiting lecturers. Carmen requalified as a secondary school mathematics teacher after the newly-formed democratic government retrenched an oversupply of teachers in the social sciences. She registered for an undergraduate degree majoring in mathematics via correspondence, followed by the FDE qualification to develop her mathematics teaching skills and found that she enjoyed teaching mathematics very much. When she became involved as a teacher-researcher, the local university invited Carmen to contribute towards textbook writing for the national mathematics curriculum.

Esmerelda’s career as a mathematics educator was seeded during her postgraduate studies. She had specialised in mathematics after the principal allocated her for teaching a new subject. She felt unsure of her knowledge of mathematics and sought further study. After Esmerelda reached the highest qualification at a teacher training college, she pursued a tertiary education at a university reserved for “coloured” students. When opportunities arose for marginalised students to participate in international programmes post-apartheid, Esmerelda pursued a three-month programme abroad. For the first time, she interacted with students across racial lines. She noticed that her peers on the programme had similar fears, emotions and dreams as her. These observations were significant; she realised that it took her to leave SA before she understood human similarities. The experience ignited her to want to do more in mathematics education for SA.

Anoushka’s route into mathematics education was made possible by the mathematics curriculum adviser’s recognition of her unique mathematics teaching approach. By unique, the adviser meant spending more time teaching an understanding of mathematics than “doing” mathematics. For Anoushka, school mathematics mirrored an apartheid hierarchical order of higher-grade and standard-grade mathematics. Most learners settled for standard-grade mathematics in her experience not because they were weaker at mathematics but because their teachers spent most of their teaching time explaining to the higher-grade learners. In a sense, the school mathematics system was set up to dissuade “coloured” girls from mathematics, placing less attention on them and encouraging an easy way out of higher-grade mathematics. Anoushka was adamant not to lose her learners to standard-grade mathematics. Ultimately, her learning-centred approach to teaching created a pathway into mathematics education.

In the absence of a career path into higher education, the women had to rely on outside sources, which they embraced. While they valued their college education, they knew that higher education spaces were reserved for “whites”. Nonetheless, they continued to pursue tertiary and mathematics education by whatever means possible as they perceived mathematics as a catalyst to life chances and opportunities. Furthermore, they also wanted to give learners (and teachers) more opportunities than was anticipated for them; in a sense, it was their way of giving back to their communities.

Bernita is the only participant who worked as a mathematics educator, employed at a technikon (reserved at the time for “coloured” students). Yet, she felt displaced post-apartheid when an amalgamation of technikons to establish new partnerships in higher education spaces meant restructuring mathematical science faculties. Mathematics staff at technikons was interspersed into faculties who viewed mathematics as a support subject. In her view, mathematics had become a means to an end, not an end in itself. Bernita felt her passion for tertiary mathematics had been stripped from her, and without her identity as a mathematician, she felt lost. She subsequently resigned from the institution.

“COLOURED” AS A MARKER OF RACE IN A DEMOCRACY

For Danah, twenty-six years into a democracy, higher education institutions (HEIs) remained unchanged and challenging. Her experience working alongside colleagues during mathematics workshops, her involvement in the national association for mathematics education, and her outstanding mathematics teaching achievements had little value to HEIs. By ignoring the value of Danah’s professional experience, the university judged her by the same employment standards as the apartheid regime. Using the same employment standards gives the impression that, in the democracy, discrimination experienced during apartheid has been washed away. It is not to suggest a lowering of university employment standards. Instead, it is for the university to be cognisant of the historical marginalisation of women with a label of “coloured”, by removing their “structural biases” that favour specific groups (Zamudio et al. 2011, 63–64). Furthermore, by undermining the lived experiences of those historically marginalised, there is a further impression of equality in the democracy, which is untrue. As Danah brings to the fore, equality gives the impression that each person has had the same historical opportunities and experiences (Decuir and Dixson 2004, 26–27). Yet, Danah felt excluded and obliterated her desire to lecture at the university level, where she felt she did not belong. She was not incapable of academia; she had plans to complete a doctorate and did so, and as an alternate, she fulfilled her passion for serving mathematics (and science) teachers from historically marginalised backgrounds at an NGO.

Employed as a mathematics educator in a democracy, Aisha experienced new challenges. She believed that some students had not shifted their attitudes toward a “coloured” woman lecturer. For example, “white” Afrikaner students confused her upbeat teaching style and reported her behaviour to the faculty head as promiscuous. Aisha believed that had she been a white wo(man) lecturer, the students and “white” woman faculty head would not have ignored the university’s procedural system for complaints against any lecturer. The experience shows that racism against “coloured” women at HEIs is illuminated as subtleties and microaggressions in lecture rooms. While there has been some leeway for “coloured” women mathematics educators at HEIs, there remains an awkwardness between “coloured” women mathematics educators and “white” Afrikaner women leadership and students. Jansen’s (2009) suggestion may be valid that race remains “knowledge in the blood” in a democratic SA, even amongst “white” students born post-apartheid. Nonetheless, internalised (and blatant) racism continues to message a racial order that “whites” rank above “coloured” women, independent of the women’s educational achievements, defending the hierarchical inequities of apartheid. As E. Taylor (1998) intimates, “whites” do not (always) view their opinion as a perspective but as “the truth”.

Carmen’s employment experiences at an HEI disclosed the detailed choice of an employee to satisfy equity and redress in a democracy. Although equity acknowledges that opportunities and experiences are unequal (Decuir and Dixson 2004), redressing equity cannot assume that the effects on the identities of historically marginalised women are different. Instead of removing racialised barriers, preference is given to “black” African women creating further marginalisation and division of “women of colour”. Similarly, “black” African women felt external and internal barriers in higher education roles (Maseti 2018; Madileng 2014), and “coloured” women also struggle to feel a sense of belonging to an HEI. The consequences of division are felt as a prioritisation of “black” African women at the expense of “coloured” (and “Indian”) women, perpetuating a hierarchical ordering of race and women. Whereas race has been used to identify previous harms of apartheid, it has also been reinvented in a democracy with consequences of further disparaging the identities of “coloured” women. The reality for all South Africans is a re-categorisation of “coloured”, “black African”, “white” and “Indian” continuing racial division and creating scaffolds of oppression, causing unnecessary division amongst “women of colour”.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to fill a theoretical void of the particular experiences of “coloured” women as they traversed through barriers into careers as mathematics educators in higher education.

Their lived experiences lay bare the extent to which their career pathways were continually determined and hindered by their race classification. The study reveals renewed theoretical considerations of what it meant for historically marginalised identities not only to forge professional identities but to rupture the constraints and limitations imposed through apartheid. There is much to admire about the tenacity of the six women in refusing to allow a racist ideology to dictate their potential as human beings. They worked with the minimum resources available to them and were determined to succeed. Their ability to find recognition in higher education spaces is remarkable. However, critical concern recognises that the onset of democracy has not necessarily undone the kinds of injustices “coloured” women were subjected to during apartheid. There are seemingly missing conversations and gaps in understanding how “coloured” women have had to access their spaces and positions during apartheid for higher education and democracy.

There are particularities of experiences that have thus far been lost in the dominant focus on a black/white dichotomy. There are complexities of oppression, marginalisation and exclusion, not only in terms of race and ethnicity but also in culture, religion, gender and sexuality. Both as a means of healing and forging an unfettered democratic identity, it is critical for higher education to attend to these unspoken and unwritten epistemologies, as lived by these six women. To assume that apartheid impacted the lives of all historically marginalised identities and communities in the same way is to undermine people’s truths. More importantly, until there is a deeper understanding and recognition of how apartheid misshaped the lives of various identities, there will always be the risk of renewed forms of discrimination.

“Unpacking” mathematics education in higher education is not only about questioning what and how to teach mathematics as a subject. It is also about providing educational spaces to unpack lived experiences of marginalisation during career advancement, particularly for those who have had to (and continue to) seek alternate paths as teachers into higher education spaces – there seems to be a missing conversation between teachers and mathematics educators in higher education. Furthermore, by only “unpacking” the what and how, takes the focus away from mathematics education’s contribution towards marginalising those historically marginalised in higher education – little is written about the feminisation of mathematics education to uphold mathematical sciences as a predominantly male career, without which gender inequities in mathematics education in higher education cannot be confronted. While we believe this article to be a significant contribution towards literature concerning “coloured” women, we are also cognizant that it is a starting point to address the decolonisation of mathematics education in higher education in SA.

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