

PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT DECOLONISATION MEANS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY AMONGST A SAMPLE OF RURAL CAMPUS STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

There is growing interest within the South African academic press on understanding the issue of decolonisation from multiple viewpoints. Actuating these viewpoints are varying stakeholder interests. One such stakeholder within higher education being the student. The study explores student perceptions on the issue of decolonisation by using a sample of students at a rural campus in South Africa. The backdrop of the study comprises calls within the literature for nuanced understanding around the experience of decoloniality. The research utilised a focus group technique with 30 final year students enrolled within the Faculty of Management and Commerce. Narrative analysis using the three levels of meaning-making was used as the data analytical tool. The study revealed two main narratives. First, the negative concerns around decolonisation. This was informed by a lack of understanding of the concept. Second, students also expressed perceived opportunities that decolonisation has in changing the landscape of higher education in South Africa. Based on these findings, implications are made that affirm student experience as important. The study contributes to an ongoing discussion around aspects related to decolonisation. The focus of this work is on promoting voice around this topic and to provide suggestions for teaching practice.

Keywords: decolonisation, education, narratives, student, academic literacies, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

The South African higher education system is in a state of flux. Chinyamurindi (2016) attributes present challenges in the system to the country's apartheid past. Lumadi (2021) adds that as a result of this past some universities may need to self-correct. This may entail hearing voices within the ecosystem as a basis for bringing change. The agenda here appears to be one for social justice efforts within the education system (Esterhuizen and Martins 2008). A work to be done here entails curriculum reform (Joosub 2021). Some argue that for this transformation to take place, a radical change to the education system is required (Msila 2017). The role of students as stakeholders become key (Barac 2015). Such efforts must be coupled by attention

to changing the culture of the institution (Msila 2017). This can be useful in driving the process of a much needed curriculum change (Themane 2021). One topic that not only affects students but also institutions of higher learning is the clarion call for decolonising the higher education system (Joosub 2021; Msila 2017). Olivier (2018, 2) describes the issue of decolonisation as “the most difficult question facing educators at universities in South Africa today”. As much as this is a difficult topic, Themane (2021) argues the topic is needed for curriculum change and the social justice agenda.

The challenge with the topic of decolonisation in the South African higher education system appears to be twofold (Heleta 2016). First, a need exists to further unpack the concept of decolonisation especially given the contextual variants that may exist. This becomes an important project especially given the prevailing widening inequalities within institutions of higher learning (Lumadi 2021). Second, to further unpack the concept of decolonisation, there is a need for a nuanced position that considers the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (Joosub 2021). This research sought to offer insight into student perceptions of decolonisation at a rural campus in South Africa. The institution is also classified as a historically disadvantaged campus. There is need for nuanced understanding of concepts such as decolonisation as part of the “inclusive” agenda of “African intellectualism” (Lebelo, Moloji, and Chitumwa 2021, 82)

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The author of this article works as an academic at a university classified as a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI). In the last couple of years with the emergence of various “fallist” movements (e.g., #feesmustfall), the author of this article has observed a radical militancy emerging among these groups. This observation is also supported by the literature (Le Grange 2021). One such call made by these “fallist” movements is for decolonised education. Yet, a need exists (away from the emotions) to offer some understanding as to what and how decolonisation manifests. A consistent argument amongst researchers (Lebelo et al. 2021; Auerbach 2017; Koma 2018; Nording 2018) appears to be for increased understanding around the concept of decolonisation especially giving students a voice to this issue (Kiguwa and Segalo 2018). The aim of this research was thus to understand students’ perceptions of the concept of decolonisation within the South African higher education context. This continues from ongoing research around the topic of decolonisation especially using student samples (Joosub 2021). Interestingly, Themane (2021) observes that in HDIs, students often face challenges related to access and subsequently often have limited chances of academic success. Lumadi (2021) adds that in general, minorities often under-perform in this system of higher education.

The decolonial tide – What is happening?

Within the higher education system, many changes are noted to be happening. Chang (2013) argues for a change in artefacts such as language, history, and culture as a way of re-writing this narrative. Becken (2011) calls for teachers and researchers within academia to free themselves from thinking that there is only a dominant way of thinking in academia and no other way. This has been referred to as “epistemological decolonisation,” a way of exposing the “other” albeit the dominant view (Chambers and Buzinde 2015, 1). This process, as believed by some, will result in more communities having more voice than others (Pritchard and Morgan 2007). The role and issue of local language development plays an important role here (Jaspers 2018). This situation potentially can shift focus away from Western-based influences and give expression to those views of groups from continents such as Africa, South America and Australia which are often under-represented (Russell-Mundine 2012). This places an important platform on the African continent for the need of such discourses around decolonisation (Lebelo et al. 2021) and vehicles not only for curriculum change but also social justice (Themane 2021).

Student voices

There is a need to give young people voices concerning the decolonising of the curriculum debate (Joosub 2021). Students occupy two key roles. First, students are key stakeholders within higher education warranting their voice to be heard (Kessi and Boonnzaier 2018). Second, students are the future of the South African economy despite the challenges in their context such as a) challenges of access to higher education (British Council 2015); b) a high unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa 2017); and c) having to grow up in a society that is unequal (Bhorat, Mayet, and Visser 2012). This has led some (Schlosser 2016, 34) to frame the current epoch in the South African higher education system to be a “time of disruption”. The emergence of this could be the questioning of the old way of thinking and challenging of colonial discourses (Minthorn and Marsh 2016). Thus, in such a context of challenging the old way of thinking and those views deemed to be part of the “greater tradition” (Sharma 2005, 992), the idea of calling for decolonisation (especially in contexts where the colonial project was at its peak) appears to be one that can be viewed as “liberating” and “engendering” (Jackson and Solis 1995, 2). This makes calls for decolonisation popular in the present (Lebelo, Moloji, and Chitumwa 2021; Msila 2017), despite other existing challenges on the African continent that may impede this (Munene 2012).

Paying attention to students’ perceptions about decolonisation offers some ramifications to the South African higher education system. First, the findings of this study might assist to

generate an understanding of a topic that is considered as emotive as well as important in shaping the transformative agenda of the country. Student voices to such a topic may assist in generating “agentic” direction from the lens of the student in the area of curriculum design (Joosub 2021, 192). Second, the findings from the study can assist in the formulation of policies and practices within institutions of higher learning. Such efforts can assist in pushing a transformative agenda for optimal and effectual functioning. This is a useful conduit for a much needed curriculum change (Themane 2021). Studies of this nature potentially can assist for a “critical self-reflection” by seeking to challenge the Anglo-American dominance in knowledge generation (Hammett 2012, 937). Joosub (2021) adds that such studies also assist in the formation of identities that better assist student participation. Subsequently, understanding voices around decolonisation can be a useful agenda in contemporary society leading to knowledge production (Travesi 2017) and curriculum development (Lebelo et al. 2021).

In South Africa, there is acknowledgment of the need to “strengthen a growing body of work on decolonisation and psychology” (Barnes and Siswana 2018, 297). This argument extends to the educational realm especially within the university context to be a place that should encourage critical thought and dialogue albeit pressing issues such as those of decolonisation that are endemic also to the wider society (Adams et al. 2015; Bulhan 2015; Seedat and Suffla 2017; Joosub 2021). All this appears in support of the social justice agenda especially within higher education (Themane 2021).

Decolonisation

The concept of decolonisation has been studied by various subject disciplines. Auerbach (2017) explored issues around decolonisation from the lens of the social sciences. From the philosophy discipline, Oelofsen (2015) argues that an understanding of decolonisation from the African philosophy realm can assist in freeing the African mind. This can be through advancing African ideas in the knowledge generation process. From the law discipline, some researchers (Himonga and Diallo 2017) have found the framing of decolonisation to concern, not just the need for the African voice but also the necessity to fuse indigenous systems into how the law is taught. Joosub (2021), using a sample of psychology students, found the type of processes ensuing from decolonisation initiatives. These form key in necessitating change.

From the natural sciences discipline, the concept of decolonisation is one that is “poorly defined and contentious” (Muller 2018, 1). A viewpoint which is also supported by other researchers (Nording 2018; Rodney 2016). This could be that such disciplines appear to be lacking in terms of transformation particularly in incorporating Black students (Muswede 2017) who come with historical legacy through colonisation especially placing a disadvantage on

those colonised (mostly Africans) (Rodney 2016). This in turn has led some to call for a focus on understanding the role that language plays in all this (Teferra and Altbach 2004).

Understanding perceptions around decolonisation can assist in building knowledge around this concept and position an African voice (Auerbach 2017), albeit the western dominance that characterises knowledge generation (Olivier 2018). For some, the renewed empirical focus on decolonisation, especially amongst African academics and intellectuals, can assist in the realisation of the African renaissance especially within higher education (Koma 2018). At a practical level, such quests can assist in efforts of curriculum development (Joosub 2021). This empirical focus is enduring, given the history and future of South Africa, and it is located within an ever-changing higher education context (Mungwini 2018).

In South Africa, Kessi and Boonzaier (2018) argue for the importance of exploring the decolonisation project within curricula as a way of affirming African voice to wider discourses. This has also been referred to as understanding the “decolonisation discourse” (Leibowitz 2016, 2) and an important platform for curriculum change (Themane 2021). A starting platform to these discourses is to consider the voices of the various stakeholders that may be affected by quests of decolonisation especially concerning curricula and research agendas within an African context (Carolissen, Shefer, and Smit 2015; Lebelo et al. 2021). Kiguwa and Segalo (2018, 310) argue that this needs to happen by also exploring the “psycho-social biographies” of both staff and students as stakeholders within higher education. Given all of this, there is a necessity for continued and focused empirical attention on understanding issues around decolonisation, especially understanding the meaning that may be attached to concepts like decolonisation (Ebrahim 2018; Olivier 2018). Joosub (2021) extends in not only understanding the meaning around the decolonisation concept but also the ensuing student processes. All this formed the focal point for this research using the perceptions of students within the commerce discipline. The research was guided by the following research question:

- What are students’ narratives of decolonisation within the South African higher education system?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To answer the proposed research question, the Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) (Vygotsky 1978) was used as a lens to understand the participants’ conceptualisation of decolonisation and how it relates to the South African higher education setting. The SCT posits learning and development to be affected greatly by the interaction that exists between the context and the individual (Vygotsky 1978). From this interaction, some form of meaning-making emerges that

leads to the development of ideas (Campano 2007; Smagorinsky 2011). Thus, the SCT can be used to understand how a student's potential use of information based on how they make sense of a past, a present and a future reality (Chang 2013) can assist in framing their understanding. This potentially can happen by questioning those activities within academia that may have been linked with legacies of colonial thinking (Chambers and Buzinde 2015). At best, the aim here is to try to rewrite the narrative using schemas found within the socio-cultural milieu to write a present-day narrative. Thus, the SCT allows for an understanding of how individuals develop and how this development interacts between the person and their context. Subsequently, ideas may emerge from all this.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the interpretivist philosophy and the exploratory research design. A qualitative approach was utilised informed by the paradigm and the research design used. This approach was utilised in order to explore even those issues that may be deemed complex and that a quantitative approach may not unearth (Kumar 2011). The research philosophy, approach, and design adopted for this study are deemed valuable to the aspects of sense-making (Chinyamurindi 2016). The use of narratives allowed the participants to reflect deeply on their perceptions about decolonisation (Chinyamurindi 2016; Lyons et al. 2012).

Sample

A convenience sample (n=30) was comprised of registered students at an HDI. Upon agreeing to take part in the research, participants first filled out a form containing questions around their demographic characteristics. Based on the information analysed from the form, a total of 16 males (53%) and 14 females (47%) participated in the study. Further, in terms of race, the majority of the participants were Black (90%) and the rest were Coloured (10%). Concerning age, the majority of respondents (57.7%) were in the 20 to 25 years cohort, which was followed by the 26 to 30 years cohort (37.8%) and finally, the 31 to 35 years old cohort (4.5%). All the students were in their final year of study and had been registered for a minimum of three years in their academic studies within the commerce discipline.

Data collection

The necessary ethical clearance was obtained from the university where the study was conducted. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and a signed written informed consent was a prerequisite before participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed as students were informed of their rights and that participating in the study was voluntary. An

advert was placed on a campus noticeboard inviting students to take part in a project to ascertain their perceptions of decolonisation. Thirty students responded to the advert and indicated their interest. A check was made to determine that each of the interested students were within the parameters of the research: a) student must be full-time and registered, and b) a student must be in their final year of studies. In terms of data collection, a semi-structured interview approach was utilised. The questions were drawn from the literature review conducted prior to the commencement of the interviews. From these interviews, the research hoped to generate narratives that could help in answering the research question and guided within the aims of this study. All interview questions were in English.

Trustworthiness

To ensure data quality, four steps were taken guided by advice from other scholars (e.g., Guba and Lincoln 1981). Firstly, initial interview questions were pre-tested with a sample of 10 students (non-participants) who fit the same profile as those interviewed in the main part of the research. Secondly, to ensure credible data, all interview data was recorded and transcribed verbatim within 24 hours. Thirdly, after transcription data, participants were emailed a copy of the transcription to verify if this was accurate as per the interview. Finally, before and during the study, reflexivity was conducted to safeguard objectivity and avoid researcher bias (Lewin, Taylor, and Gibbs 2005); this was also done to ensure sensitivity with regard to how data was collected, analysed and represented (Mays and Pope 2000). In doing so, comprehensive notes were taken at all key stages of the research for additional depth and quality.

Data analysis

The data analysis procedure was guided by suggestions from previous narrative research (McCormack 2000). First, the completed transcriptions were imported into QSR NVivo Version 11 software. Second, a data analysis procedure based on three levels of meaning-making was adopted (Thornhill, Clare, and May 2004). Level 1 was performed by re-reading each interview and listening to audio recordings. This process helped to understand and identify markers from each story to answer the research question. In level 2, participants' responses were classified into meaningful categories. Quotes based on the kind of perceptions around decolonisation were then used to illustrate the markers. Level 3 helped the researcher to analyse the content of the gathered narrative accounts and themes. This means of analysis allowed cross-case comparison in understanding participants' sense-making around their lived experiences of stigma (Nachmias and Nachmias 1996).

FINDINGS

From the data collected, two major narratives emerged. First, the students expressed concerns about decolonisation. Second, students also expressed the perceived opportunities concerning decolonisation. These narratives are presented next.

Student concerns about decolonisation

The first narrative expressed by the participants mainly comprised their concerns about decolonisation. This narrative reveals not just the students' concerns, but also their scepticism about decolonisation. These were grouped into three main concerns.

First, a lack of understanding of what decolonisation is. For instance, one participant expressed this:

“Our understanding of decolonisation is really informed by the constituents we belong to. For instance, I am from the EFF student command and our position is different from that of many other political parties. The devil is in the detail, the detail of your political party.” Participant 6.

The second concern was about the role decolonisation will play in view of the strategy of universities while needing to be a locally responsive issue. For instance, this was expressed by one participant:

“A subtle issue that no one wants to talk about here is to how the decolonisation project fits within wider quests around us becoming global citizens. To me, no one wants to talk about this.” Participant 2.

Finally, a concern students had about decolonisation was the concept of just being “old wine in new bottles”. In essence, expressing scepticism about decolonisation. For instance, one participant expressed this:

“Nothing will change in my view, the same issues that affected those before us will continue. I am even scared when attempts are made to change teaching and learning under this guise of decolonisation. We in Black institutions still suffer the most.” Participant 21.

The lack of understanding around the concept of decolonisation was apparent. The case of two participants is worth noting. Participant 12 in their admission raises their concern “I really don't know what it means, I guess that is why I am fearful.” Conversely, participant 19 reveals an often extreme position and illustrates distortions around the concept of decolonisation. In the word of participant 19 – “decolonisation means getting rid of White influence in teaching & embracing Black views”. One student leader on campus, attributes an understanding of

decolonisation to be influenced ideologically by political influence. The student leader belonging to the Economic Freedom Fighters makes the argument that the “devil is in the detail, the detail being your political party of choice.”

The voice of international students was also viewed as important. The position here appears to be one where international students preferred to distance themselves from aspects related to decolonisation. This could be due as argued by Participant 11 that decolonisation was not an issue for international student but one described as a “local matter”. Other international students appear to disagree with such a view as that of participant 11. For instance, participant 9 viewed the matter of decolonisation as one of “all Africans” and for “local and international students”. Despite the differing view around the concept of decolonisation, the next concern in the form of fears were around the prioritisation of decolonisation especially in Black universities.

Participant 30 described the issue of decolonisation as “needed in making even the playing field”. The students bemoaned at the lack of opportunity between White and Black universities. The situation led Participant 21 to appreciate how both White and Black universities appear united in making the call for decolonisation. In the words of participant 21, “there is unity in the different institutions around the importance of decolonisation”. Despite the unity, the students also complained at the speed at which the outcomes of all the protests are slow in being realised. Participant 5 described the situation as concerning – “protests are important to raise voice but deliverables from such are needed”. This leads to the second narrative finding based on the data analysis.

Students’ perceived opportunities around decolonisation

The second narrative expressed by the participants mainly comprised the perceived opportunities about decolonisation. For the students, decolonisation appeared to be a way to change the methods and content of what was taught in institutions of higher learning. For instance, one participant put it this way:

“Through decolonisation, we could now see more indigenous methods of teaching including embracing local languages.” Participant 4.

Others linked the ushering in of decolonisation with the Pan-African agenda. In essence, this entailed an opportunity for more African voices in teaching and learning. For example, one participant narrated their view:

“I love the Zimbabwean students on campus and their education system. Such a concept will help us know better our African brothers & sisters. We can improve from learning from them.”
Participant 3.

Finally, at a grand scale, decolonisation existed to the students as a conduit of driving the wider transformation agenda in South Africa. This was key for the purpose of redress and a sense of corrective justice needed in the country. For instance, one participant narrated their experience:

“Decolonisation could be the change we are looking for, starting in academia to wider society.”
Participant 30.

The students saw opportunity in pushing for the decolonisation agenda as it was a platform to change not only the methods but also the content of what was being taught. Participant 12 described the subject of decolonisation to be “the last opportunity in changing the process of knowledge generation and dissemination”. Participant 4 appears to also support the need for decolonisation as an opportunity in making sure that we “see more indigenous methods of teaching including embracing local languages”. Participant 9 described the embracing of the decolonial agenda as much needed in “making even” the disparities that characterise the current higher education landscape.

It was also interesting to ascertain to note how pushing for decolonisation was praised to be a conduit that can drive the wider transformation agenda in South Africa. For participant 30, pushing decolonisation proffered opportunity in the “promotion of minority African languages” often disregarded within the university system. For participant 21, the decolonisation agenda starting from the university system would ultimately “trickle into change for society” in general. Participant 18 summarises the opportunity created by the decolonial project to ultimately benefit students especially “those students whose identity is stripped away by the toxic institutional cultures”.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to understand students’ perceptions of decolonisation within the South African higher education system. The research was guided by the following research question: What are students’ narratives of decolonisation within the South African higher education system? Through the data analysis, two main narrative themes emerged as espousing the students’ perceptions of decolonisation. First, the concerns of decolonisation were noted. Coupled with this were the functional aspects of decolonisation. In essence, as per the suggestions of Heleta (2016), this research within a South Africa context helps unpack the

concept of decolonisation and gives voices to students as key stakeholders. Underlying processes to such understanding become key, answering the call by Joosub (2021).

The voices of the students through their narrations in the two findings position a sense of identity towards the need for social justice (Esterhuizen and Martins 2008) with decolonisation being illustrated as one of the vehicles through which this can happen. Further, students appear to be needing to discuss further aspects around decolonisation and its importance to their context (Chambers and Buzinde 2015; Becken 2011). This becomes an important discourse centred on aspects of inclusivity and a basis for curriculum design interventions (Lebelo et al. 2021). This is heightened by the finding in which students see the decolonial project an important conduit to change society. Further and in support of the assertions by Themane (2021), the findings of the study – especially for local examples in teaching and learning – can be useful in prioritising relevance.

This research advances calls for research exploring decolonisation in the South African context (Barnes and Siswana 2018) by giving voice to students as important stakeholders within the higher education system (Joosub 2021; Kiguwa and Segalo 2018). The concerns and opportunities as found in this research give critical focus to seeking ways in which the student experience can be improved within the academy. This for example, given the argument by Kessi and Boonzaier (2018) of the need to establish how narratives, as found in this research, may relate to not just the discourses within curricula but also wider society. This may be extended even further to exploring how the identified concerns and opportunities can inform research agendas within the higher education context (Carolissen et al. 2015). A starting point as illustrated through the concerns and opportunities is for greater awareness and dialogue concerning the nomenclature of the concept of decolonisation. This can be a useful platform in understanding further student processing within such framing (Joosub 2021).

The conducted study had some limitations. First, the views expressed by the participants represent subjective framing around the issue of decolonisation. The sample size was used to illustrate this framing. This can be a notable shortcoming of the research as other participants could voice something different from what has been found. Second, the research was only focussed at a single point of collection. Maybe the views of the participants could have changed over time and there is need to acknowledge this shortcoming.

Future research could improve on this research. This can be done by conducting the same research within other institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Given the emotive nature of the topic, other research techniques such as photo-voice can be used to elicit pictorial expressions and narratives around topics such as decolonisation. Finally, future research can also be longitudinal in nature and aim to understand student voices (and other stakeholders)

over a period of time with multiple points of data collection. This can help enhance understanding of the topic by providing a richness of data.

CONCLUSION

This research study was useful in revealing students' perceptions of the concept of decolonisation. The study revealed the negative concerns that students have about the concept of decolonisation and informed about their fear that nothing will change after all the current hype. However, the students also expressed that decolonisation can serve as a great opportunity through which change can happen, especially within a higher education context (and wider macro-context) perceived to be unequal. Through these two main findings, an understanding can be made based on the lens of the students and how this can be a useful and a continued basis for conversations and interventions that help students.

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