RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Be your Sister's Keeper: Personal Experience of Travelling a Lonely Journey in Academia

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Abstract

Neoliberal universities are farcical and absurd places where black women are marginalized intentionally or unintentionally to discourage them and others from significant accomplishments on the academic ladder. Black woman marginalization takes variegated forms, and it has its roots in patriarchy and identity confusion. Whilst access is created by the system, there is very little support to enable black women to survive and succeed as they climb the bureaucratic ladder in neoliberal universities. The journey is worsened when one climbs the ladder and leaves sisters behind who choose to be 'campers' in these universities. Be your sister's keeper is a biblical term that speaks to the fact that we need to practice ethics of care among ourselves. This is a qualitative self-study that I narrate my thirty-eight years of lived experiences, and it reflexively evaluates my lonely journey in academia. I use this platform to conscientise my African sisters about the challenges that they are likely to encounter in neoliberal universities. Caring for one another is an African term rooted in 'ubuntu' African philosophy that has prevailed over the ages. I argue that as black women, we need to create spaces where we can offer another not only a shoulder to cry on but encourage each other to navigate the academy and its mazes. I am convinced that my experiences and personal journey in academia add a voice to novice academics who must still navigate the bureaucratic ladder. I discuss cultural stereotyping and patriarchy, workplace oppression, and gender-based violence (GBV).

Keywords: *African philosophy; career development; gender identity; neoliberal universities; Ubuntu*

Introduction

Studies on self-reflection and self-referential processing are popular in cognitive neuroscience (Van der Meer *et al.*, 2010). This one is an evaluation process where specific selves were asked to provide their objective opinions about what is applicable to them. It is important to have an accurate representation of one's experiences because that consequently informs the attitudes and prejudices that individual's hold over the ways in which they have behaved and interpreted personal experiences. Studies on self-study illustrate that people tend to remember experiences that relate to themselves. Himmerick (2020) argues that when positions are defined using a certain category, leaders who emerge there are disproportionately aligned to what is described, and gender identities that are not discursively interrogated tend to be marginalized. Taking the above issues into consideration, in this self-study, I discuss my subjective positionality and experiences as a novice teacher through to becoming an academic, and head of department (HoD) in academic spaces. The paper reflects on my lived experiences of racism and stereotyping in my previous and current workspaces. Race and gender are interlocking and intersectional social constructs inseparable from one another (Davis, 2016). My journey has been characterized by a complex blend of gender and racial discrimination. I argue that black women experience triple challenges arising from patriarchy, workplace oppression, racism, and gender-based violence (Higgs and Smith, 2018).

The triple oppression that women experience in institutions has an impact on how they identify themselves along their career trajectory. The experiences were more intense and explicit in the apartheid era, becoming subtle and less explicit post 1994. During the apartheid era, the individual hierarchy in the workplace in South Africa was in the following order: white people, 'coloured', Indians and black people. Even in this racialized hierarchy, the most

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preferred persons were the males, and females were secondary. This order of preference obviates the fact that black women occupied the lowest position in the work environment (Inya, 2020). My career journey in academia as black woman was tumultuous due to limitations attached to black women in the workplace. Being your "sister's keeper" has framed my social and academic concerns and has led me to write this paper using self-study. My narrative, especially for higher education, illustrates how triple oppression of black women and absurd experiences in neoliberal institutions affected my identity as an academic. In narrating my journey, I start from the time when I qualified as a teacher, through to being a lecturer, rising in stature to Senior Lecturer and Head of School and back to my beginnings.

In this self-study, I discuss my personal experience through the lens of auto-ethnography. This is informed by my experience of working in the academy. Auto-ethnography is a qualitative research method that uses personal experiences ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graphe") cultural text, experiences, beliefs and practices ("ethne"). Ethnographers operationalize the reality that personal experiences are infused with political, cultural norms and expectations. It is characterized by self-reflexivity (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). Auto-ethnographers' aim is to show "people in the process of figuring out what to do." In this study, it assists interested scholars to develop academic identities (Cutri *et al.*, 1998). It is aligned to post modernism in the sense that it challenges conventional ways of thinking (Wall, 2018). It argues that there are other ways of knowing, and in that way it is emancipatory. It gives voice to the marginalized, covering topics such as gender, race, sexuality, discrimination, participation in sport, illness, death, pregnancy and earning a PhD. People write about their unique experiences and the ways in which they have been marginalized in their becoming. Auto-ethnography accommodates the subjective emotionality and researchers' influence on research rather than assuming that these matters do not exist.

In this self-study, I tell a story about my unique personal experiences in higher education. Although I have been in higher education for more than three decades, I divide my experience into the first ten years of service and then the next ten years and beyond.

My Sojourn as a Lecturer in the First Ten Years in the Academy

There is a hierarchy in institutions of higher learning. The incumbent commences as a junior lecturer and works their way up and becomes a lecturer. This is followed by the positions of Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Full Professor. Some colleagues enter the institution at any level depending on the level of experience gained in other institutions. Incumbents are promoted to the next level because of their academic achievements which are measured by metrical contributions made in research, community engagement and teaching and learning. Furthermore, the incumbent needs to have made a mark at national, regional and international levels. Each individual positions themselves in their career trajectory and university organogram. When I started in secondary school, I had only previously taught in a primary school. I was comfortable in the growth because I was qualified to teach there. I taught a subject which was not my major and I was therefore not appropriately qualified to teach it. I had little knowledge of the content (CK) but I lacked pedagogical knowledge (PK). As a novice teacher I had to teach myself the subject, but I discovered that I needed significant mentoring and assistance. I looked for a mentor and I became so consumed by the new subject to the extent that I refused to teach the subject for which I was qualified. I initiated my own community of practice by looking for a person who mentored me in the profession.

After a year of teaching, I enrolled to further my studies so that I could actualize my goal and vision of teaching at a college and ultimately, at a university. There were no significant tensions when I started my teaching career because I was at an entry level of my teaching experience, and I did not pose any threat to those in leadership. I was qualified to teach in any institution of higher learning because I had appropriate qualifications and experience. At that time, it was the policy of the Department of Education that a teacher qualified to become a lecturer after five years of teaching experience and one was supposed to have a postgraduate qualification. I responded to the calls for new employment opportunities that were advertised in the local newspapers. I presented myself to the head of the institution and asked for details of the employment. This was during apartheid, pre-1994. The head of the institution pretended to be assisting me and later, I would hear that a white person had been employed. I later found out when I was employed that most of the white colleagues had lesser qualification than myself. When I met black colleagues in the corridors, I had a feeling that they were saying, "You do not belong in this space"; "We worked extremely hard to be where we are", and that "You have to work very hard to be where we are." Immediately, this low self-esteem would set in, and I did not dare initiate a conversation with my smattering self. At some point I approached the head of the institution hoping that he would do something about my employment in the institution because he happened to be black. Instead, he told me that I was over-ambitious and that I had to

improve my qualifications. When I started working, I was set up for failure because I was given an empty office which had no resources. I had no mentor to assist me as a young and inexperienced academic.

I was employed in an institution which had predominantly white staff members, and they were my managers and supervisors. I was appointed to teach an African language. That was a common flaw in the institution. I fought to teach a module that I was comfortable teaching. In the early days of my higher education lecturing experience, my black colleagues and I experienced racism: we were not expected to conduct lectures as white colleagues asked us to do administrative work such as distributing learning materials, monitoring registers and sit-down during lectures. We were only recognized as lecturers after a number of unpleasant meetings and conversations with white colleagues and white managers. I knew that promotion opportunities were not going to materialize in the foreseeable future. What prompted hope was that the country was slowly drifting towards democracy and measures were set in place for a new dawn. I also remember an incident where a white senior colleague suggested that we ask students to attend tutorials with the lecturer that they liked. I strongly objected to that suggestion and told her that we needed to develop a strategy where we allocated students equally between us. I also had unpleasant incidents with the white senior colleague which resulted in disciplinary meetings with her. She stormed out of the office when she felt that she could have been wrong, after all. The head of the institution shuttered himself in silence, preferring to end the meeting in some unresolved cliff-hanger. In a study on coping with suppression and psychological distress among strong black women, results confirm that the unique experiences of black woman are associated with their exposure to racism, sexism ad gendered racism (Drakeford, 2017). This attests to the fact that there is discrimination and abuse in institutions of higher learning designed to discourage, discriminate and marginalise certain groups of people because the staff complement of the institution was predominantly white pre-1994. For me, a deliberate effort was made to create conditions where certain groups of academics would be discouraged and leave work. With reference to patriarchy, the entrenched socio-cultural stereotype which undermines women's ability to be leaders and managers in the workplace, cuts across social structure (Kanjere *et al*., 2011).

I always felt that I was employed because the head of the institution, who happened to be a white male, saw my persistent effort to work at a college. Ultimately, when I was employed, I was appointed to teach African languages. I was uncomfortable teaching the course, but I accepted it as it was the only available option for African lecturers. The only way I could access this entry point was to accept the appointment. I was, essentially, bending to explicit racism in a white hegemony. I told myself that I would find a way of getting to the course that I wanted to teach once I was employed at college. In the workplace gender-based violence (GBV) is manifested in many forms and rooted in intentional and unintentional behaviors. Some intentional behaviors have roots in apartheid in the South African context. Black women were the lowest paid in the workplace as compared to other races and gender. They suffered "triple oppression" from their male counterparts under colonialism as well as an inveterate racial profiling (Higgs and Smith, 2018). It was taken for granted that they should occupy a lower hierarchy in the workplace. White men treated women as lower citizens; it was worse when coming from another black woman. I am intrigued by the fact that as black women, we stop talking and listening to what any white man has to say to us. When the reverse happens, when white men are having a conversation and a black woman approaches them, she needs to wait until they finish their conversation. This is a norm in institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Personally, it is women who need to disrupt that cycle of abuse in the workplace. We should incessantly remind our young male counterparts how we want to be treated. The reason GBV is so rife in society is because it is rooted in behaviorist theory of learned behavior (Higgs and Smith, 2018). As long as it happens in society, it is going to escalate because the younger members of society learn this from observing how older members treat women. The younger members of society learn what is not intentionally taught, those behaviors need to be addressed in society. This cycle needs to be disrupted. It is women who need to conscientise the younger members of society on how they should navigate the space.

In the institution where I started teaching, the issue of comradeship and alignment was more important than competence. White lectures were in majority in the teachers' college. The issue of equality and equity was overlooked because apartheid functioned on these exclusions and enclaves. I found out later that my white colleagues were not appropriately qualified to teach at college because later in the years I became their boss, and they resented it. The institution was constructed such that there was a strong sense of "us pitted against them." The institution privileged cultural patriarchy practices, and this was normalized. My determination to teach at college was so strong that I gave up a permanent position for temporary employment at one such college. Whenever I went past the office of the Head of the institution, who happened to be a white male, he would call me

into his office and ask me to sit. He would then remind me the extent of the risk that I had taken since I sacrificed a permanent position for a temporary position. He would further let me know that even if the position was advertised, it did not mean that I would get preferential treatment by virtue of being in the position. Furthermore, he let me know that I would be competing with people outside and inside the institution and some of them would be more qualified than me. This nasty engagement happened invariably on a daily basis.

As much as my principal was telling the truth, I did not appreciate the repetitive negativity. If he felt he had an obligation to convey the unpleasant news to me, he would have just written this and let me append my signature if he thought he needed to protect himself from my blackness. My focus was on teaching students and those reminders spoiled my entire days. Remember I had no one to whom to convey my challenges. Indeed, the position was advertised, and I did not get it. I was so devastated. For him, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy – "I told you so." Fortunately, the lady who got 'my position' became an intimate friend and I heard her say that she had read the institution policies which assisted her to respond to interview questions and that was a wake-up call for me. When I got permanently employed, I confronted the head of the institution about the abuse that I had experienced under his leadership. Personally, the behavior was unprofessional, coming from a leader and directed at a subordinate. He denied all evidence of racial bigotry and pretended not to hear what I was saying. He then stormed out of the office and sobbed. I had never seen him this dejected. I would not have dared discussing that matter at the time when apartheid was at its peak. At some point later in my career, I approached the head of the institution who happened to be black. He advised me to further my studies. Patriarchy was at play when I was sidelined by the white head of the institution. The rejection by one that I thought would help me points to an ossified patriarchy in the transitioning to higher education spaces. I am convinced that this gender stereotype might not have existed if I had been male. Men exhibit a strong inclination towards an ingrained and traditionally affirmed superiority over women. Normalized cultural patriarchal and gender role stereotypes (Chabaya *et al*., 2009) are known to be the major reasons why there are only a paltry few black women in higher education spaces and the low self-esteem that assails them.

Senior Lecturer, Head of School, and the Second Ten Years in the Academy

At a certain point in my career, I had a female manager who was unethical. We differed on the content that was supposed to be taught in one module. I voiced that the content she was suggesting was outdated and that there was more progressive content relevant to the new curriculum. Instead of engaging academically on the issue, she was upset with me and insisted that I teach the content which she recommended. I was compelled to do so against my will. The heat and acrimony simmered for a long time. I found out years later that she insisted on that content because she was writing a book which she wanted to prescribe for students. My experience under her leadership was sordid. I remember the time when she invited all colleagues to a function, and she left me out deliberately. That was a painful experience. Nyangulu (2018) argues that the 'Bigman syndrome' is an unjust form of power prevalent in the African continent. The 'bigman syndrome' is manifest when someone perceives themselves as above the law. In this case, the behaviour is called 'the big woman syndrome' because the act was committed by a woman (Salafai, 2014). These challenges confirm the triple oppression that woman have suffered, ranging from workplace discrimination with racism embedded in it, to patriarchy and gender-based violence. With reference to workplace discrimination and racism, the question that comes to my mind is whether it is good leadership to put a novice academic in a lecture theatre which has no resources and expect her to be an effective professional. Over and above the action, does it matter how much such leadership insists on a daily basis to remind the novice of the gravity and risk of leaving a permanent position for a temporary position. Spivak (2004) calls such marginalization of black women from academic discourse a form of epistemic violence and racism.

I became the Head of School post-1994 after twenty-seven years of teaching in higher education. That experience was also unpleasant. The most problematic person in the school was one with whom I was contesting the position. Again, I was thrown in the deep end because I received little support from my supervisor who was one-hour drive from my workstation. I was the only one in her ambit who had to travel an hour to attend meetings. I got to hear that my supervisor preferred the person who was problematic to me. I remember the day when the problematic colleague incited colleagues and they came to attack me in the new office. One of the colleagues had a video on and she wanted to capture everything. I was furious and nearly manhandled the offensive lady. I am forever grateful that in spite of such provocation, I did not do something that would have landed me into trouble. The intensity of the challenges that I had resulted in the diagnosis of high blood pressure (HBP). I refused to stand for the second term because I regarded my health as more important than being a Head of School. In a study by Chabaya *et al*.

(2009) on the factors that impede advancement of women in leadership positions, results verify that although the majority of women qualify for promotional positions, they do not apply. Gender role stereotypes, they argued, manifest in the form of low self-esteem, lack of confidence, women's perception that their role in the family overrides all other roles and lack of support from the home and the workplace. Women are not given space to be leaders in the workplace. It was worse for a black academic, hence post-1994, the government policy compelled institutions to transform.

Those transformative initiatives were resisted and women subjugation continued. Even today when politicians and political parties want to be seen to be transforming, they use gender disparity in canvassing for votes. When a woman is appointed in top position on the rare occasion, it is explicitly stated that bold action is critical. We still see pockets of women failures in the workplace when women in leadership consolidate that rare occurrence. Whilst access is created, sometimes no measures are crafted to create success. Whilst I was fighting for equality at work, I experienced GBV at home. I found such behavior confusing because I had not been nurtured on violence in my parents' home. I believe that as a country we have not done enough to address GBV. The fact that we still experience it on a vast scale as a society means that it has not been addressed by the perpetrators. Whilst attempts are made to deal with the perpetrators, there must be more explicit strategies on how men should manage their emotions. Personally, the cause of abuse in my marriage was that my husband decided not to improve himself whilst I doggedly improved myself academically. I tried to motivate him to improve himself for his own sake, but his obstinate inclinations ended in our divorce. In traditional society, the elders used to teach the young members how they should behave in acceptable ways as members of the society. In those teachings, men were taught how to behave in times of distress and how they should treat women. African men are influenced by African cultural stereotypes promoted by patriarchy. Sometimes African knowledge, wisdom and culture are marginalized by knowledge and lifestyles from the West. A vacuum is created and as a result African man are regarded as cowards if one lays his hands on a woman. Those kinds of teachings need to be revived in society.

As a young girl who grew up in the location, I did not experience much GBV as compared to what is happening today. I feel we have lost the moorings of how a woman should be treated in our communities. This scourge has impact on how young men perceive women. The practice of GBV is caused by the high rate of unemployment. Many men in South Africa are unemployed, and they rely on woman to provide for them. In a traditional society, men are supposed to be providers, but the reverse has happened. Women are under pressure to support men who are never grateful. To spite the good gesture, they reciprocate with violence because they feel constrained. This behavior is rooted in their sense of shame and lack of having creative ways to survive in society. At the time of my employment in the institution of higher learning, I studied towards my doctorate – a rocky journey. The reflections on my doctoral journey are important because I do not want other young and aspiring doctoral students to experience the same. My doctoral supervision was unpleasant and a rocky road from the beginning to the end (Wisker, 2013). I started with a seasoned supervisor who was a scholar in the field of education. He gave me meaningful feedback on time (Lee, 2008). He followed-up on me when I was quiet. His feedback assisted me to push the boundaries of knowledge. After a short while, the good supervisor was promoted and someone else took his place which was similar to which is similar to the sentiment echoed by Oparinde (2021) who had challenges when the co-supervisor was no longer fully available to guide. Even worse in my own case, I was not informed of the new supervisor.

The institution failed me on the selection and orientation of the new supervisor. I reckon the outgoing supervisor should have introduced me to the successor. I do not want to blame my supervisor and the institution about the transition. My troubles started when I struggled to find him, he was not in the office when I called. I wrote emails and there was no response. We ended up meeting after several futile attempts and I introduced myself: I told him who I was and where I was with my studies and that I was ready to submit a piece of my work. In my engagement with the new supervisor, I discovered that he knew nothing about me. I also told him that I applied for a six-month study leave and it was approved. I submitted my work; he did not write any comments, but he asked me to continue and write a full thesis. In his communication, he asked me to write a dynamic introduction and conclusion and then submit it to him. For a moment I thought I had written a good piece of work which made him ask me to write a complete thesis, but I quickly dismissed that thought. When I finally submitted the thesis with no supervision at all, I waited the whole year without any feedback (Parker, 2018). It was only when I raised an alarm to the supervisor after a year and with the assistance of my line manager who communicated with the head of department of the institution where I studied that there was progress in locating my thesis. The thesis was then taken to external examiners after a year when I had followed up on it. Of the bashing comments I received from the external

examiners made me contemplate committing suicide. I remember one examiner saying that his honours students could write a better thesis than what I had written. It was devastating; the supervisor even told me to work on my own after the problematic feedback. I was asked to resubmit, and the thesis went for a re-marking. The fact that I was left without regular supervision was "dehumanizing" (Wheelaham, 2010). I did not want to share my experience with anyone because it was embarrassing.

I navigated the research space by myself. I was not assisted in scaffolding from one phase in the supervision process to the next because of the absent supervisor. This had a knock-on-effect in the sense that I had a distorted view of academic-identity which resulted in low self-esteem about supervision process. I submitted my thesis two more times, and it got a pass after the third submission. There were several reasons which prevented me from communicating with my supervisor. The one that came to mind at the time was a gender–related reaction (Carter *et al.*, 2011). It was through the intervention of my line manager that things started moving. Apart from the feeling of inadequacy as espoused by dehumanizing theories, I also felt like I was unfairly treated, justice was not served. I sometimes feel that I have not dealt with it in a way that will make me find closure. I believe that writing this paper could assist in the healing process. There was an expectation to do what I was unable to do because I was not taught how to do things. The 'doctoral field' was an unfamiliar territory. I lacked the knowledge of the adept supervisor to take me through the process and development of supervision. In a study on empowering women in the workplace (Daya, 2011), results confirm that organizations which have policies and procedures in place need to be supportive of women in the workplace.

An ethics of care is a normative theory that holds that moral action centers on interpersonal relationships and care as a virtue. They were developed by feminists' movement. It is sometimes criticized for perpetuating traditional stereotype of "a good woman" (Conesa, 2018). Ethics of care is rooted in Ubuntu: when you love you care. When you care you suffer because you are concerned? Being your sister's keeper comes from the notion of making that call and stopping by to find out how your sister is doing because of the number of challenges that we encounter as women in academia. When you see a novice black woman and latecomers in academia, it is important to nurture them so that they do not experience the things that we experienced as black women. Women tend to focus on everyone else but themselves. The burden and deep concern that touches the heart for new academics is the care that sisterhood should possess (Jansen, 2013). Taking care of one another as one must minimizes the abuse of academics in her institution (Conesa, 2018). The other factors also manifest in the students that we teach. I think that my presence in the institution gave them a sense of hope if they want to take the academic trajectory. Having sisters in academia is important because discrimination and prejudice against women's ability to enter into certain spaces is a universal phenomenon. When I started work pre-1994 during apartheid, I was given an office that was a prefabricated, extremely hot and had no air conditioning. The office that was allocated to me had no resources. I needed sisters who would tell me that we have been through this as well and find a way to assist. Gender stereotyping and discrimination will persist if we do not adopt the attitude of being your "sister's keeper" to each other. We need that support system, otherwise GBV will be perpetuated. In a study on disentangling influences of strength and self- silencing on depressive symptoms among Black woman, results illustrate that schemata characteristics that cause depression were still yet to be found in black women. This means Black woman are strong and resilient (Abrams *et al.*, 2019).

Conclusion

We have come a long way to give up now. I trust that this too shall pass as people often say and I trust that you are holding on under the challenging circumstances with which we are faced. It would be comforting to hear that I am not the only one. I longed to receive encouragement during that trying time. It is my wish to know if you, my sisters, went through the same experiences at one time or another and you emerged the victor. I hope that the anxiety and fears that I experienced shall provide solace to other people who read this, although my situation is different from others. Sometimes I feel like I have been in this trying challenge for a long time, and this sometimes sows some self-doubt. I wish someone could assure me that it is normal to have such feelings and experiences. I wish that what I am experiencing is normal and I am not unique. This I still regard as part of being my sister's keeper. It is my wish that we have organizations committed to transformation (Kofman and Senge, 1993). The "be your sister's keeper" is a post-euphoria that has not gained enough traction in our society and in academia because African women continue to face a myriad of challenges in institutions of higher learning in particular. It is a story that needs to be told to strengthen young academics who might experience the same phenomena. There is a glaring underrepresentation of black women professionals in academia, more so in the leadership positions. One

might argue that barriers to academic progression and career development are non-existent, when one considers the intersection of race and gender one needs to understand that there is resistance by the authorities. I had a sister who cared but she was not caring for me with reference to academic work. She was only concerned about my wellbeing because I was going through divorce. She was unable to assist me with academic work. This is a clarion call that caring has to be spread to Black women in academia. I am convinced that "being your sister's keeper" becomes a sequel for the former and other upcoming voices to bring their testimonies on how we need to navigate the academic space. The "be your sister's keeper needs to be understood alongside other activism resistant activities that take place in our communities. Being your sister's keeper is about creating opportunities for professional recognition and advancement for your sister in academia. Although being your sister's keeper is a biblical term, it has its roots also in "Ubuntu" which essentially means caring, loving and supporting one another.

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