AUTHOR:
Desireé Pearl Larey[1]

AFFILIATION:
[1]University of the Free State, South Africa

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An exploration of African-student agency: Placing students from historically disadvantaged communities at the centre

ABSTRACT

At the national universities within South Africa, various events during the past years indicate that students suffer under different kinds of oppression. It is widely acknowledged that students from poor, rural geographical areas find the university space alienating and not speaking to their life worlds. In this paper I respond to Fataar's (2019) notion of the "misrecognised" university student in the South African context. My focus on students coming from historically disadvantaged communities aims to contribute to ongoing debates about social justice for students in the university sector. The problem to be addressed in this paper is the misalignment between the critical horizontal knowledge of historically disadvantaged students and the knowledge codes of the university relating to learning, curriculum, and pedagogical practices. I therefore argue that if university institutional practices recognise, embrace, and align with students' agency, resilience and adaption, a reframed institutional platform could engage students in their intellectual becoming. Furthermore, I am guided by two questions: 1) How can students from historically disadvantaged communities use their critical horizontal knowledges to connect with disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge of the university to enhance critical specialised consciousness in the becoming of ethical humans? and 2) How can an African theorisation of student agency form the basis to consciously reframe the core institutional function of the university? In responding to these questions, I locate my arguments in African-student agency, reviewing literature by African scholars to gain an understanding of the African concept of student agency.

Keywords: *African-student agency, critical horizontal knowledges, historically disadvantaged communities, South Africa, specialised consciousness*

1. Introduction

In the South African university sector, students from historically disadvantaged communities suffer under different kinds of oppression. It is widely acknowledged that students from poor, rural geographical areas find the university space an alienating and disconnecting one that does not speak to their life worlds. In *Critique of Black*

reason, Mbembe (2017) metaphorically brings the educational subject into view. Mbembe (2017) describes how the Black self must know how and when to become like everybody else, and how, and when to become nobody, invisible. According to him, since early capitalism, the term *Black* was used to refer to the conditions imposed on people of African origin. This meant that Black people were subjected to "different forms of depredation, dispossession of all power of self-determination, and, most of all, dispossession of the future and of time …" (Mbembe, 2017: 56). He maintains that a Black person is born in Africa, lives on the African continent and, importantly, is of the Black race (Mbembe, 2017: 91). Mbembe (2017) describes how the Black person unveils her/himself and in this act of identification affirms her/his existence to become somebody.

In response to Mbembe's thinking, Fataar (2019) perceives a gap in Mbembe's theorisation of being Black. For Fataar (2019: 25), being a Black person (as described in Mbembe's work) is not sufficiently located "within the structural, affective and post-human complexity of African urban and rural fields". Moreover, Fataar's (2019) focus of student agency in the context of Africa is on the students' movement, space, scale, and the body in trying to account for how students transact their educational lives. In this paper, I attempt to add to the historical, structural, affective, and post-human complexity of students in the context of South African universities.

The university sphere is rapidly changing and adapting to the demands and challenges of the current era. At present, while we are gradually moving away from the restrictions of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, students and academics at universities must respond to these rapidly changing environments. Fataar and Norodien-Fataar (2021) concur with the work of Cope and Kalantzis (2017), which provides a productive schema for developing a digital learning ecology in universities. This learning ecosystem refers to a "complex interaction of human, textual, discursive, and spatial dynamics … which take on a coherent, systemic form" (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021: 162). Academics must rethink pedagogical approaches to accommodate changes in learning spaces and relations, and in how they will engage with learning mediation and assessment practices (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021) to stimulate knowledge acquisition and critical engagement with the knowledge possessed by students.

In post-apartheid South Africa, youth in Black communities are often described in terms of their marginalisation and labels of being disadvantaged. Previous research, such as the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1993; 2003), shows that students' socio-economic family background significantly influences academic success. On the contrary, recent poststructuralist theorists have engaged in the complex interplay of structure and agency (Kapp *et al*., 2014) in determining students' academic success. In this regard, Thomson (2009) claims that the lives of individuals are both constrained and agentic. In this sense, the concept of agency is understood as an individual's capacity to make conscious choices and to act and improvise in response to situations (Holland *et al*., 1998). Individuals will act and interact within their context to gain the needed resources in their attempts at self-formation.

The problem to be addressed in this paper is the misalignment between the critical horizontal knowledge of historically disadvantaged students and the knowledge codes of the university relating to learning, curriculum, and pedagogical practices. Historically disadvantaged students challenge the formal institutional culture of the university so that universities must rethink evaluation structures or conceptions of historically disadvantaged students to adjust their core function to accommodate diverse population groups. My focus on students coming from

historically disadvantaged communities aims to contribute to ongoing debates about social justice for students in the university sector. I argue that if institutional practices recognise, embrace, and align with students' agency, resilience and adaption, a reframed institutional platform could possibly engage students during their intellectual becoming. Disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge of the university and a focus on critical horizontal knowledges (life-world knowledges) of historically disadvantaged students could possibly lead to critical consciousness of students. Two questions guide me in this paper: 1) How can students from historically disadvantaged communities use their critical horizontal knowledges (life-world knowledges) to connect with disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge of the university to enhance critical specialised consciousness in the becoming of ethical humans? and 2) How can an African theorisation of student agency form the basis to consciously reframe the core institutional function of the university? The intention is to contribute to the rudimentary account of student agency, based on a dialectical evaluation of students who are coming from historically disadvantaged communities to reframe the culture of the university to accommodate diverse student groups.

2. Methodology

In this theoretical paper, I employ the Bordieuan concepts of cultural capital and habitus to conceptualise the educational research field – the university – and to contextualise the subject – the university student. Of particular importance are the critical horizontal knowledges of students coming from historically disadvantaged communities and the critical specialised consciousness or African-student agency which enable students to mediate educational pathways to achieve success at university. Through employing the concepts of the social theory of Bourdieu and work from mainly African scholars, I aim to contribute to an African theorisation of student agency in reframing the core institutional function of the university, placing the misrecognised university student from a historically disadvantaged background at the centre of current epistemological discourses.

The paper evaluates the misrecognised student in the university, displaying how they express kinds of capital and habitus, different from the traditional form of the Western theoretical framing of cultural capital. Historically disadvantaged students are utilising these accumulated capabilities (life-world knowledges/critical horizontal knowledges) from their community lives to enable them to integrate academically and succeed at university. I further engage in the institutional function of the university to highlight the institutional positional practices in handling these "unprepared" students within the university. A discussion follows on how students use their pedagogical and mediation strategies, followed by suggestions on how universities can incorporate these knowledges and practices to reframe their core institutional function to align better with the critical horizontal knowledges of historically disadvantaged students. Finally, I showcase how attributes, dispositions, learning strategies and pedagogies of historically disadvantaged students add to the theorisation of an African-student agency.

3. The "misrecognised student" at the university

A large percentage of students entering university in South Africa come from historically disadvantaged communities. The concept *historically disadvantaged communities* refers to the inheritance of isolated Black communities established during the period of apartheid (Jansen, 2018). Historically disadvantaged Black families reside mostly in areas far from

town centres – locations in rural areas and townships in urban areas represent remnants of the apartheid regime. Mills and Gale (2010) use the term *disadvantaged* and argue that the responsibility for the poor academic performances of marginalised children has been placed at the feet of culturally "disadvantaged" or "deprived" children and their families. They proceed to argue that, in some accounts, "deviations from the cultural ideal are viewed as deficiencies and deprived; children are seen to come from a group with no cultural integrity of its own" (Mills & Gale, 2010: 56). Distorted or inaccurate social beliefs as perceived by oppressive social groups contribute to the perpetuation of inequality in society (Gorski, 2013). In this regard, Swanson (2002) claims that social difference is firstly constructed as disadvantaged, then reconceptualised as "pedagogically disadvantaged". By implication, poor socio-economic backgrounds become associated with low academic ability.

In South Africa, most historically disadvantaged students come from schools with poor resources, receiving a substantial inferior quality of education when compared to their wealthier counterparts (Van der Berg, 2007). Spaull (2013) further claims that the strong legacy of apartheid, and the subsequent link between education and culture result in poor South African students performing worse academically.

To further the discussion, Marshall and Case (2010) report on developments in higher education scholarship for a historical-structural understanding or a dialectical perspective which locate the concept of disadvantaged in structures that act on individuals. An appeal is made for institutional responses to students' socio-economic everyday lives which might incorporate certain resources that can be mobilised to the advantage of students in universities (Marshall & Case, 2010).

Most Black students at universities come from historically Black urban and rural areas and from welfare-supported families (Jansen, 2018). Students in historically disadvantaged contexts are confronted daily with their communities' social pathologies, including alcohol and drug abuse, crime, violence, and teenage pregnancy. These students develop an ability to recognise and navigate the darker aspects of their community and educational life worlds (Fataar, 2019). In opposition to these adverse community influences, these students are motivated to access higher education and to succeed at their academic development.

Fataar (2019) describes the misrecognised university student as an individual with high educational aspirations, approaching her/his studies with high expectations to succeed. Fataar (2019) explains that their pathways to university admission are often long, as they often stay at home for a year after their matriculation, planning to apply and be funded for university admission. The common assumption in current South African literature is that students from historically disadvantaged communities are doomed to failure due to a lack of cultural capital (Czerniewicz & Brown 2011; Fataar, 2012; Cross & Atinde 2015). Contrary to this, students with middle-class cultural knowledge use their middle-class dispositions to their advantage to progress academically. Accumulated capital helps these middle-class students to adapt easily to the academic environment of the university (Kloot, 2009). Bourdieu's lifetime work exhibits that the cultural capital of the middle class responds more favourably to the formal culture of the university.

Kapp *et al.* (2014) further describe how historically disadvantaged students enter an "unhoming" space that pushes them to the margins – in opposition to the centre – and leaves them unsupported by university structures. These students are narrowly immersing into academic discourses, neglecting the different dimensions of students in their transitions to the

university space. Although students are motivated by high educational aspirations to achieve academic success, Kapp *et al.* (2014) and Norodien-Fataar (2018) sketch images of how students must settle for lesser courses and extension programmes that cater to meet the needs of students with lower marks. These authors claim that the university usually responds with developmental initiatives relating to teaching and learning approaches to immerse these students into university life. Claims related to this practice are that universities neglect the cognitive, affective, and strategic dimensions of students coming from schools bearing the scars of apartheid schooling. This implies that although the abolishment of apartheid in 1994 heralded an age of hope for a new democracy, the newly elected government not only inherited a deeply unequal society but was also challenged by a segregated education system. While the segregated system permitted the preservation of a privileged schooling system, Black learners were educated in conditions of deprivation and extreme neglect (Lemon, 1999: 98). In a sense, inequalities in terms of resources, instruction, and governance, compared to historically advantaged White communities, continue to persist.

Kapp *et al*. (2014) suggest that instead of constructing students in pathologizing and deficiency manners, universities are challenged to create practices that will harness "students' agency, reflexivity and motivation" in meaningful ways. In their article, *Successful students' negotiation of township schooling in contemporary South Africa*, Kapp *et al*. (2014) illustrate how a group of students from working-class backgrounds successfully navigates their environments. They access and utilise certain resources in their schools and communities to support their learning and achieve academic success. These resources are community organisations with specialised programmes, extra classes at other schools, and fellow students from multi-racial schools. In this writing, students talk about their sense of themselves and how their right attitude towards their own learning helps them with different facets of their schooling processes (Kapp *et al*., 2014). These situated academic practices provide students with alternative learning models to cultivate the academic and linguistic competencies and transition from school to university to navigate challenging and disconnecting spaces.

Themane and Mabasa (2021) write on the same subject and show how historically disadvantaged Black students possess the ability to overcome adversative circumstances. The students do this through connecting with peers and community partnerships such as the church and community trusts, and through the support of academic and higher education institutions. These authors draw on many other researchers highlighting students' adaptation when provided the needed resources with a supportive social environment. The students draw on self-agency aspects, such as "anticipation, coping and adaptation" to navigate their spaces inside and outside the university to access and succeed in their studies (Themane & Mabasa, 2021: 23).

Post-structural theorists took these theoretical pointers in consideration and developed a lens to perceive how poor working-class students build on their past cultural knowledges, allowing them to navigate their academic paths which lead them to positive outcomes. To further the discussion on the 'misrecognised' student, I first engage in the concepts of Bourdieu (1993, 2003), cultural capital and habitus to discuss how the theorist shows that the cultural capital of the middle-class benefits middle-class students and not necessarily working-class students from historically disadvantaged communities.

4. Cultural capital and habitus

In this section, I introduce Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and habitus and share his insight that people enter schooling from different structural positions, associated with different social habitats. Agents (the concept used by Bourdieu for individuals) cultivate certain dispositions in life and through early-life practical immersion, they embody distinctive qualities of cultural disposition, or "habitus" (Hattam *et al*., 2009: 304).

In the introduction to Bourdieu's *The field of cultural production,* Johnson (1993, in Bourdieu, 1993: 7) defines Bourdieu's account of cultural capital as "forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions". He furthermore maintains that for Bourdieu, "cultural capital is a form of knowledge, an internalised code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts" (Bourdieu, 1993: 7). As perceived, only a particular layer of society, the middle-class, obtains this kind of distinctive accumulated capital. While the middle-class cultivates a habitus in line with the cultural capital they own, schools embody cultural capital in the form of classical knowledge which aligns with middle-class cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Bourdieu and Wacquant (2007) are also of the opinion that cumulative exposure to certain social conditions instils an ensemble of durable and transposable dispositions in individuals. These dispositions relate to the internalisation of the external social environment, which is subsequently inscribed as the social condition inside agents. The implication is that if the structures of the objectivity of the second order (habitus) are the embodied version of the structures of the objectivity of the first order (the social environment), then the analysis of objective structures logically carries over into the analysis of subjective dispositions (Bourdieu and De Saint Martin, 2007, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2007). Contrary to this, the social circumstances of historically disadvantaged students therefore give them a certain kind of disposition in life, and eventually also a particular type of habitus. As already demonstrated, these students' family backgrounds and life circumstances differ compared to the lifestyles of middle-class families. Life within extended families and in historically disadvantaged communities is far removed from the lives of privileged, middle-class families in the centre of the town. However, these working-class students cultivate valuable dispositions in their local environments, which help them to their way through life.

Bourdieu (2003: 19) also suggests that in a subjective social reality, agents own their habitus, which is "both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices". This "habit-forming" force is cultivated in educational institutions in that

> the school provides those who have been subjected directly or indirectly to its influence not so much with particular and particularised patterns of thought as with that general disposition, generating particular patterns that can be applied in different areas of thought and action, which may be termed cultural habitus (Bourdieu, 2003: 344).

The owners of this particular standpoint are in an excellent position to produce cultural objects and classified representations in social reality. In the space of the university, middle-class students have an academic advantage because of their middle-class habitus, contrary to poor, workingclass students coming from historically disadvantaged communities. Students bring reading and literacy practices from middle-class schools and Black rural and township schools, respectively. Students from middle-class families are subjected to culturally inspired

reading cultures in their homes (Fleisch, 2018) and these align with the culture embodied in schools, placing students from middle-class families in a favourable position at university (Bourdieu, 2003). On the other hand, students from Black township and rural schools inhabit reading practices stemming from a culture of rote learning, repetition and chorusing, an ongoing legacy of Bantu education and one that is a limited type of pedagogic modality (Fataar, 2019). Students who enter university with negative pedagogical modalities are perceived as unprepared for university studies. Universities target them for academic development programmes to intervene and remedy what they are 'lacking' to ensure student success and high pass-through rates.

Norodien-Fataar (2018) goes a step further in her writing about the misalignment between the cultural capital embodied in universities, and middle-class families and working-class knowledges of working-class families. She explores the misalignment as the tension between students' feelings of disconnection and their aspirations to study at the university. In her study, she unpacks the interrelationship between the affective, conative, and cognitive components of habitus and the crucial role of engaging with the social reality of subjects at the university.

Norodien-Fataar's (2018) description of the interrelationship between the affective, conative, and cognitive components of habitus points to agency that students display in pursuing their studies at university. The affective elements of the students' habitus highlight their motivations, aspirations, and determination to participate fully in their university studies. In addition, the affective elements put the spotlight on their feelings of alienation and disconnection in the space of the university. Furthermore, the conative elements of the habitus focus on the intentions and goals of individuals in their social space. This alludes to individuals' attempts to reflect and take action to make sense of their environments. Norodien-Fataar (2018) extends the idea that university students use appropriate bodily comportment and discipline to grow learning pursuits. The cognitive component of habitus refers to students' capacity to find patterns and meaning in the social world, referring to students' ability to understand scientific concepts and competencies to carry out academic tasks.

Students bring these life-world knowledges or critical horizontal knowledges – cultivated through their working-class habitus – with them, embodied from their external environments and then expressed in their current university space. This is the form of agency that students carry with them in the strive to succeed in the difficult and disconnected environment in which they find themselves. When universities opt to consider more fair evaluation structures or accurate social beliefs to recognise these students' bodies, their knowledges, attitudes, capacities and contacts possessed, they can create opportunities to connect better with these students.

In the section that follows, I engage in the disposition of historically disadvantaged students and how students engage in their own realities to facilitate their academic integration and own their destiny.

5. Critical horizontal knowledges

Successful learners coming from high schools in historically disadvantaged communities into university spaces already have, among other knowledges, the following critical horizontal knowledges: aspirational, navigational and resistance capital. Larey (2018) reports on how learners from historically disadvantaged schools use creative ways to help themselves achieve academic success. They demonstrate skill, willingness, and confidence to actively

seek support through social networking in their local community to obtain the necessary resources which they do not have readily available in their domestic living arrangements. These resources include, amongst others, internet sources from community-based initiatives, private transport from farm owners to attend better schools, and scholarships offered by parents' employers. Learners in these environments envision what they can become as they exercise their capability to aspire considering their educational and wider social practices.

The concept of learners' critical horizontal knowledges also refers to how young people's dispositions (habitus) give them direction through people who inspire them. Teachers, parents, and grandparents are spiritual leaders and motivators in a context where role models and mentors are scarce. These role models and mentors are members of the learners' own racial/ethnic and/or gender group who are using their personal experience and capabilities to guide others in their development (Blackwell, 1988, in Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Teachers, school principals and family members inspire learners to make informed choices in life and demonstrate to them the confidence to act on their own behalf. In addition, they offer direction through their personal experiences and accomplishments to assist and guide young people in their environments.

At the opposite end to school resistance – attitudes displayed by working-class learners – are the aspirations, will and determination of many learners in historically disadvantaged communities who aspire to learn, and who aim to be successful despite a curriculum they cannot relate to (Larey, 2018). They value the extra classes, which are parallel to the private classes that more privileged learners receive. These learners count on the cultural capital of teachers to clarify the middle-class knowledge of the curriculum. In fact, these learners have an intense need for their teachers to explain the curriculum content. Often, a second or third explanation is needed, and this is also why additional classes are crucial for historically disadvantaged learners to achieve academic success.

In line with the above discussion, the school, again, has a contradictory role to play in the lives of these learners. On the one hand, the school seems to provide a curriculum so foreign that it is difficult for most of these learners to make sense of it. On the other hand, the school must compensate for this by playing a role in making the curriculum understandable for all learners, who come from different social groups, to support them to succeed academically.

Learners from high schools can eventually display attitudes of resilience, a sense of collectedness and a certain sense of consciousness, and this makes social change possible (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Learners also illustrate the right values and attitudes to prove others wrong, and do advance in life. In this way, places where learners live and learn become spaces of "understanding of resistance as a site of possibility and of human agency" (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001: 337).

In the university context, historically disadvantaged students are using their inhabited place of alterity or space of multi-reality that they cultivated in their home and community lives. Marshall and Case (2010) write on the past experiences of the disadvantaged students which enable them to take up initiatives to forward their academic pursuits. Experiences of past hardship and dealing with multiple responsibilities in home life equipped young people to take up initiatives in the academic life and to live more meaningful young lives. Moreover, experiences of failure are just a confirmation that the failure will be overcome, and that students can successfully navigate university life. Consequently, this inhabited space of alterity could be used to perceive many perspectives in life, which could be seen as an advantage to excel (Mann, 2001).

Furthermore, regarding critical horizontal knowledge cultivated by these students, Cross and Atinde (2015: 309) make an argument for the "pedagogy of the marginalised". Students use the alternative forms of capital, their standpoints in a historically disadvantaged environment, and pedagogy to evoke cognitive processes. Specifically, students use the ability to apply prior learning applications to new situations to adapt to challenges and opportunities in the university. Students relate to their community ways of being from their past living arrangements, so that people in their new environment can assist and support them (Themane & Mabasa, 2021). Young people are consulting and seeking advice from older and more experienced people to enable them to fully engage in these new environments. I argue that acknowledging the practices of students would enable universities to create an institutional platform that could appropriately engage students in their intellectual becoming.

6. Institutional function of the university/disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge

In this part of the paper, I engage in the institutional functionality of the university. Boughey (2007) maintains that People's Education (since 1950) in South Africa, a radical movement against apartheid education, aimed to challenge teacher-centred pedagogies and content-loaded and contextually inappropriate curricula that were part of Bantu education.

During post-apartheid, due to processes of democratisation and deracialisation, the university system has opened its doors to all population groups in the country (Jansen, 2018). Physical access to higher education was achieved and a new student population entered the university space. One of the reasons why Black students prefer to further their post-secondary schooling through the university is their resistance to the idea of vocational and technical training. In this regard, Badroodien (2011) writes about Black people´s deep-seated notions caused by colonial and apartheid practices where academic schooling was just reserved for Whites.

Additionally, Jansen (2018) explains that one of the problems of most students accessing universities was that they were academically weak because of a weak schooling system. This situation caused major inefficiencies in the system of higher education. Universities were compelled to come up with strategies to improve the high dropout rates and low academic performance of historically disadvantaged students.

New developments surfaced in curriculum selection and teaching methodologies that would empower students towards critical thinking. Boughey (2007) points out that these ideas were taken up in the South African academic support circles. These changes start to emerge on the development of liberal institutions to meet the changed demography of the student population rather than of the individual to meet unchanged institutional culture. Instead, academic support came up with development initiatives, a turn away from the previous focus on the perceived deficiencies Black students brought with them into the university. The changed critical discourses steer this negative focus rather in the direction of curriculum and staff development, which could bring about the needed institutional change. To further the debate, Morrow (1994, in Boughey, 2007) argues that what was necessary for Black-student success was "epistemological access" to the university. He argues for the mediation of epistemological access through student, staff, and curriculum development to sustain the university. Jansen (2017) explains that epistemological access means that students must have access to knowledge, what knowledge is and how knowledge is constructed. Jansen is of the

opinion that universities have succeeded in providing access for masses of students, but not necessarily access to knowledge for these students. He mentions that student performance is reflected in the overall dropout rate in all universities in the country.

Lonka *et al*. (2021, in Themane & Mabasa 2021: 21) conceptualised epistemic access and success. Epistemic access encompasses "the creation of an enabling environment by the provision of resources such as academic, administrative and support staff" (Themane & Mabasa, 2021: 21). Epistemic success is the "collaborative knowledge-building, reflective learning, individual construction of knowledge and the ability to apply knowledge in practical situations" (Themane & Mabasa, 2021: 21). Botes, Moreeng and Mosia (2022) write about academic-literacy support interventions to supplement students' academic-literacy skill development. These authors also mention specialised cross-aged mentor support, which intends to aid with the academic needs of students who experience learning difficulties. In this context, academic support also entails supplemental instruction, for instance, peer-assisted study support sessions to improve retention and success rates in historically difficult courses.

The critique by many researchers is that this developmental academic support is more generic in focus. Lozada and Croft (2021) found that these academic support interventions are not programme specific, but somewhat remedial by nature. Moreover, Bennet, Richardson and MacKinnon (2016) argue that the generic approach towards development courses fails in its response to programmespecific qualities that students should acquire in their academic programmes. Le Grange (2020) investigated whether an academic literacy course addressed the faculty-specific academic-literacy needs of students. The author found that at the university under study, developmental opportunities lacked academic research skills, although high value is placed on the category of academic research skills in the mainstream courses. Developmental opportunities are not always successfully incorporated in academic literacy courses to support mainstream modules and 'underprepared' students.

In line with these arguments, Walker (2010) links the purposes of higher education (and the university's institutional function) in individual and communal lives with Nussbaum's (1997) central capabilities. Particularly important for this study is Nussbaum's first capacity of critical thinking or critical self-examination. According to Nussbaum (2006), critical thinking is about a life that accepts no beliefs as authoritative, merely because it is part of a tradition or a common habit. Furthermore, according to Nussbaum (2006), critical thinking is about the questioning and challenging of all beliefs, statements, and arguments. To live with a critical awareness is to take on reasons that are logical and consistent and to have a justification of why things are the way they are. For the university to foster this ability for all students requires the development of a critical standpoint on our beliefs, traditions of logical reasoning and testing of ideas for consistency, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgement. Universities must consider this ability in the programmes offered to engage students in their intellectual becoming.

Currently, because of the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic brought along, universities have managed to use online learning more successfully to foster critical epistemic engagement with students. The challenge these days is to reach university students, physically and remotely, and to foster critical consciousness for students to function as ethical beings in society.

7. Critical specialised consciousness/African-student agency

Norodien-Fataar (2018) claims that students' strategies have allowed them to close the gap amongst one another, in particular between their pre-university habitus and the university field. In this regard, I differ from the author's observation. As discussed in the above section on critical horizontal knowledges, I conclude that students have already fostered this habitus to mediate strategies in their educational paths. My argument is that students cultivating these forms of capital, especially in their high school years, through their habitus, merely extend their educational practices in their university years to shape their educational experiences to succeed in their studies.

In this section, I use the work of Norodien-Fataar and others to report on strategies and horizontal practices that university students employ which, for me, inform African students' agency. Research has revealed that students frequently approach peers, older students and tutors to offer them advice, insight and guidance into lecturers' styles in teaching and learning approaches. These navigational practices also assist students to form trusting networks with peers to immerse them in their studies, engage more deeply in their coursework and understand their course programmes (Kapp *et al.,* 2014). These university strategies correlate with practices of high school learners who seek and establish relationships with role models. High school learners rely on teachers and principals to offer them extra classes to support them in more difficult subjects, give them a sense of belonging in the world and inspire them to strive for more in life. These navigational practices of students are also an extension of the influence and support of family members and other community members (Themane & Mabasa, 2021). Role models and mentors play a determining role in learners' development and socialisation. In the university context, students look for people like these as a basis for their engagement in their study programmes.

Students realise that for them to be successful in their university studies, they need the academic capital to engage thoroughly in scientific concepts. They therefore use these critical horizontal knowledges to step into the disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge of the university. With reference to resistance capital, students confront the formal university structures and foster skills to study in English, struggling to make sense of core concepts and to acquire science-related knowledge in their studies (Norodien-Fataar, 2018).

Students regard consulting a lecturer as vital, especially after having received feedback from assessment. They express resistance capital in the form of displaying the right values, goals, and attitudes to prove others wrong about themselves and to take up all opportunities to advance in life (cf. Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Another way of bridging horizontal knowledges and the formal knowledge codes of the university is the application of information communication technology (ICT). Students are skilful in using mobile technologies and social media applications to aid them in understanding scientific concepts and in using e-learning platforms to their full advantage. The students' transversal or empowering practices fill the gap between horizontal engagement and the formal academic structures of the university (Boughey, 2007). In this way, students use their critical horizontal knowledges as a steppingstone to access the cultural capital embodied in the formal structures of the university (Norodien-Fataar, 2018). Universities where students live and learn thus become spaces of "understanding resistance as a site of possibility and human agency" (cf. Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001: 337).

An African-student agency aligns with conditions of interconnectedness, communal values of support and guidance and a post-human way of life. This is seen in how young people are supported by structures in society, particularly in the university space by peers, older students and selected academics who are willing to assist students.

Importantly, Case (2008) maintains that student learning is characterised as the gaining of a specialist discourse of involving the development of new identities. Examples of attributes of this new identity are autonomy and self-direction. Students are taking on challenges and opportunities that initiate their sense of purpose (Cross & Atinde, 2015). Worth mentioning, on the process of career choice, Hodkinson (2004: 6) describes the "horizon for action" within which students exercise their agency. Universities must consider how students actively construct their identities to mobilise resources outside and inside themselves. Institutions of higher education must opt to incorporate students' strengths and sense of themselves to reframe the core institutional function of the university.

University culture that acknowledges all the facets of the historically disadvantaged student, along with other social groups, has the potential to align better with these students' critical horizontal knowledge. The integration of students' critical horizontal knowledge with formal scientific knowledge could support the student to tap into disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge of the university. Acknowledging the views and experiences of these students not only places the human as a racially oppressed being at the centre but enables an understanding of the oppressive practices which forced students from historically disadvantaged places to the margins of society. Such a dialectical view is significant for establishing a connection between inaccurate beliefs about people and socially unjust practices and, in this case, motivates the university to reframe its core institutional culture.

8. Conclusion

Students use their subjectivities to aspire to become somebody in life. As illustrated in the above sections, students already show during their secondary schooling that they critically engage in their own social world to contribute towards the transformation of oppressive structures in society. They use different kinds of capital and concomitant strategies in their local context to acquire what they need to achieve academically to enter tertiary education. Students from historically disadvantaged communities bring these transversal practices with them into the university space, redefine it and use it in various forms. For example, when struggling to understand scientific concepts in English, students will use their mother tongue to mediate understanding to grasp their course content.

Students learn to live and pursue their studies as post-humans (and ethical beings) in larger society. As individuals categorised as disadvantaged, they exercise agency in their choice to participate in their university and local lives. Through widening their horizons, students develop new identities, focus on personal growth, and overcome adversities to successfully navigate the alienated and disconnected higher education context.

When universities opt to acknowledge the misrecognised student as an ethical human being who is self-determined and full of aspirations and actively grows their learning pursuits and capacities, then the university could be in a better position to change their core institutional function. The misrecognition of the humanness of the historically disadvantaged student in her/

his educational "becoming" should be foregrounded by a strong appeal for a more accurate and less distorted account of humans. Reframing the core function of the university to better align with student bodies, their knowledges, competencies, and contacts possessed could support students from historically disadvantaged communities to accomplish individual and communal strives, at present and in the future.

End note

I obtained ethical clearance to conduct the research from the Ethics Board of the Faculty of Education of the University of the Free State (Ethical clearance number: UFSHSD 2015/0503/21).

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