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Student agency: two students’ agentic actions in challenging oppressive practices on a diverse university campus

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ABSTRACT

University campuses are spaces not only for self-reflection and critique but also where asymmetrical power relations create experiences of exclusion and marginalisation for many students. Within the complexity of such spaces, transformative opportunities are opened up for student agency and agentic actions. This qualitative article uses a narrative approach to explore how two students used transformative opportunities to question and challenge institutional culture. Data were generated through reflective exercises and semi-structured interviews, spread over four years. Through reflection and storytelling, the students used agentic actions to realise their roles as change agents working towards inclusivity. In drawing on Bandura’s social cognitive theory and critical emancipatory theory, we foreground how a reflection on past experiences, engagement with present judgements and an imagined future enable agentic actions. The study illustrates the importance of student agency in raising critical awareness and the challenging of oppressive practices.

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Introduction

Universities are regarded as symbols of knowledge and innovation, the producers of skilled staff, social justice agents, and co-workers of social and cultural vibrancy (Kay et al., 2010). Ongoing student protests have reshaped higher education in South Africa as spaces of activism and agency (cf. Raghuram et al., 2020). We can no longer think of our students as customers only; instead, a university is supposed to be a space of intense self-reflection and critique (our emphasis)’ (Soudien, 2010, p. 234).

Many students face challenges of negotiating their way into the world of university life amidst diversity issues. However, they are not just passive subjects of the university environment but exercise agency in coming to terms with their environment. In the context of university politics, mainly when couched in a transformation agenda, students can experience possibilities to become actively involved in changing their environment (Oliver, 2018). Therefore, the relationship between universities and students should be seen as that of partners and co-creators (Kay et al., 2010).

Klemenčič (2015, p. 13) perceives student agency as ‘a process of students’ self-reflective and intentional actions and interactions during studentship’. Inherent to student agency are the notions of agentic possibility and agentic orientation. The combination

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of power and will serves as the impetus for students to take responsibility for a positive campus experience by acting as agents of change. Student agency is influenced by lived experiences and the historical events that occur in students’ lifespans. The broader sociocultural context plays an influential role in the social interactions of individuals (Kahu, 2013), and the possibility of agency is, to some extent, determined by students’ embedded narratives of history and culture. We agree with Klemenčič (2015, p. 18) that, in a diverse university context, the interaction between students from different racial, gender, ethnicity, and language groupings creates ‘transformative moments’, enabling agentic actions.

This article explores how two students on a diverse university campus grasp transformative moments to question and challenge practices of oppression. We argue that human agency cultivates a positive social identity, which, in turn, contributes to collective agency and inclusion. Students who use opportunities to act as change agents contribute to an inclusive campus culture by challenging oppressive practices. In the first part of the article, we provide clarification on how we perceive the entanglement of student life, agentic action and empowerment. This clarification is followed by a brief discussion of Bandura’s social cognitive theory and critical emancipatory theory as the constitutive elements of the theoretical framework that informed this study. An exposition of the research design is followed by an illustration of the manner in which two students’ narratives foreground their use of agentic possibilities to challenge institutional culture. We conclude by arguing that troubled spaces of subordinate and dominant structures enable opportunities for student agency and agentic actions towards positive change. Listening to the voice of students who question and critique institutional culture and oppressive practices has the potential for proactive agency.

**Student life, agency, and agentic action**

Student life is mainly about social interaction and exercising agency in transitioning to adulthood (Klemenčič, 2015). In the context of university life, students are continuously defining and redefining their identities, notions of justice, and appropriate behaviour in interactions (Marginson, 2014). Ongoing marginalisation and exclusion of social identities on university campuses (Clowes et al., 2017) compel students to assess and engage with issues of social justice. Students’ intrapersonal identity focuses on their values, norms, and perspectives and serves as a unique way to differentiate themselves from others. Interpersonal identities are linked with categories of otherness pertaining to, inter alia, race, class, gender, and religion. Depending on the context, students can experience either inclusion or exclusion (Schwartz et al., 2005). Student protests on South African higher education campuses have illustrated the importance of student voice (Mpatlanyane, 2018). According to Cook-Sather (2006), student voice is a legitimate perspective playing an active role in enabling a cultural shift towards the opening up of spaces to the presence of students. Within such spaces, students can become critically conscious of social oppression and start to critique their assumptions and deconstruct opinions of themselves and others (Solorzano & Bernal, 2011). Taking responsibility for their positionality and perceptions requires students to develop a sense of agency (Boler & Zembylas, 2003).

Higher education relates to emotional, cognitive and practical adulthood, and student actions are mostly self-reflective and driven around searching for identity and a sense of
being (Marginson, 2014). Agency, a crucial element of identity, is state of self-formation and a result thereof, albeit always enacted in relation to something (O’Meara, 2013). A sense of agency is influenced by individual identities, the interaction between those identities, and the social contexts in which students find themselves. Klemenčič (2015, p. 11) notes that student agency is about the ‘quality of students’ self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment’. Although students are embedded in social contexts that can enable or hinder their degree of agency, they always have the freedom to act in a chosen manner (Sen, 2000). However, the assumption of agency does not necessarily guarantee positive outcomes (O’Meara, 2013).

We draw on Klemenčič’s (2015) distinction between agentic orientations and agentic possibilities to understand agency as an interplay of past experiences, present judgements, and future predictions. Agentic orientation refers to the will to make choices to act and interact. Students are influenced by the ‘past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present’ (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 2). Whereas agentic orientation is about the will to act, agentic possibility alludes to students’ perceived power to achieve intended outcomes within the context of action and interaction. Agency is not something students possess; instead, they achieve agency through continuous reflection on engagement with temporal-relational contexts of actions. Students find themselves in social groups where the distribution of power and resources is determined by dominant and subdominant structures (Tatum, 2013). To ensure social justice as the recognition of each individual’s unique and self-determining needs (McDonalds, 2007), the achievement of agency requires students, individually or collectively, to act out in the present while drawing on past experiences and an imagined future. Agentic action subsequently involves an agentic orientation to reflect on conditions to continuously make decisions towards positive change. Bandura (1999, p. 27) mentions that ‘human agency operates generatively and proactively on social systems, not just reactively’. Agentic action, however, remains a temporally embedded process informed by the contingencies of the engaged present or moment (Klemenčič, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). We argue that the interplay of past experiences, an evaluative present, and an orientation towards the future creates possibilities to act agentically in challenging issues of inequality.

**Theoretical framework**

This article draws on Bandura’s social cognitive theory and the critical emancipatory theory to foreground how two students’ awareness of inequality assisted them to critique and challenge dominant power structures on campus.

**Bandura’s social cognitive theory**

Bandura’s social cognitive theory perceives agency as a way through which people’s deliberate actions lead to events (Kim & Baylor, 2006; Klemenčič, 2015). Bandura (2001) proposes four key concepts that can be used to construct a framework for understanding human agency. These concepts are intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. **Intentionality** is rooted in self-motivation and constitutes a proactive commitment to action (Bandura, 2001). When individuals are cognitively conscious of the present, their anticipated future goals start to motivate and regulate their behaviour.
Agency not only requires intentionality as an inner approach to make choices and plans of actions but also *forethought*, through which ‘people motivate themselves and guide their actions in anticipation of future action’ (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). With time, forethought adds direction, consistency and a sense of being to an individual’s life. When anticipated goals are reached, they will shape and regulate behaviour. Through *self-reactiveness*, individuals motivate and regulate their actions through remedial actions, monitoring and guiding the self, using specific standards (Bandura, 1986). Remedial action may include self-monitoring, performance self-guidance via personal standards, and corrective self-reactions.

Purposive and meaningful actions can only occur if goals are part of the value system and personal sense of identity. *Self-reflectiveness* is a process of introspection about an individual’s functioning in the social world. For Archer (2007, p. 4), self-reflectiveness alludes to the regular consideration of the self in relation to social contexts. The metacognitive ability to reflect on feelings, thoughts, and actions is perceived as a key factor in human agency (Bandura, 2001). Similarly, Ese-osa and Vincent (2019) highlight the importance of critical engagement and reflection in becoming a change agent. By evaluating outcomes against goals, individuals determine the efficiency of their actions. As the core of human agency, efficiency is the belief that the power to bring about results from actions lies in the self. As aptly stated by Bandura (1989, p. 175), self-efficacy ‘operate[s] on action through motivational, cognitive and affective intervening processes’.

**Critical emancipatory theory**

In drawing on Freire’s (1990) theory of the oppressed, the critical emancipatory theory seeks to critique and challenge dominant power relations, emancipate the subordinate, cultivate hope among the marginalised, and stimulate communities of practice (Nkoane, 2012). Empowerment is premised on the individual’s ability to utilise knowledge, skills, and resources to create and execute an action plan towards collective agency and inclusion. Arguably, empowerment requires developing a critical awareness of the socio-cultural conditions that have shaped and are still shaping people’s lives, the injustices stemming from these conditions, and a recognition of the ability to change such conditions (Freire, 1990). Almeida et al. (2016) point out that the development of awareness and social consciousness constitutes critical awareness. As critical awareness is an essential component of emancipation, it foregrounds the importance of power in our understanding of the processes of empowerment (Sadan, 2004).

Whereas dominant and subordinate social structures stem from a network of asymmetrical power relations, power involves practical empowerment when individuals use their abilities to influence the social world (Fetterman, 2017). Individuals use skills, knowledge, and available resources to draw on agentic possibilities when confronted with issues of difference and marginalisation. Thus, empowerment depends on self-efficacy, on fostering individual confidence in the ability to change lives. For Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is a common ability that consists of the ability to successfully manage cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural aspects. Strong self-efficacy results in empowerment, which, in turn, strengthens self-efficacy (Rawlett, 2014). Whereas practical empowerment is a process through which individuals gain knowledge of oppressive practices, transformative empowerment focuses on liberation from traditional ways of doing, changing the status quo, and breaking the cycle of socialisation.
(Fetterman, 2017). Through reflection, negotiation of power, and open dialogue, communities of practice are created, thereby fostering collective agency and inclusion. Human agency can thus have a ripple effect on communities and carries the potential to bring about social agency that transcends to social justice.

Methodology

Research design

In order to explore two students’ actions and voices in questioning and challenging oppressive practices on campus, we were interested ‘in the meanings portrayed in story form’ (Wang & Geale, 2015, p. 197). We followed a narrative approach of telling, interpretation, and retelling of stories. Human experiences are central in narrative inquiry and should be understood by taking the time, context, and embedded stories into account (Clandinin, 2018). A narrative methodology assisted us to interpret and analyse the participants’ experiences about how they had interacted with other students over four years and how they had negotiated within the university environment to exercise agency.

Participants and research context

This article stems from a more extensive project exploring how six students navigated and negotiated their narrative identity construction on a diverse university campus. The longitudinal study generated in-depth students’ narratives of over four years. In drawing on our understanding that the number of participants does not play a significant role in qualitative research, we decided to work with the depth of quality data generated from two students (cf. Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). We took our cue from Boyd (2001), who regards two to ten participants adequate to reach saturation. This article considers how a female Xhosa student and a male Tswana student question and challenge the oppressive practices on a diverse university campus.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to note that the Constitution of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996) recognises 11 official languages. This article refers to four official languages, namely isiXhosa, Setswana, Afrikaans, and isiZulu. Languages are associated with ethnic groups, geographical contexts, and racialised identities (black, white, Indian, and coloured); the latter is still used in present-day South Africa for equitable employment purposes. As a black Xhosa student, Nomsa speaks isiXhosa, a minority language in the research context. Otsile, a black Tswana, speaks Setswana, the dominant language in the research context. Afrikaans is spoken by many white and coloured South Africans, whereas Zulus speak isiZulu, a minority language in the research context. Nomsa and Otsile (pseudonyms) gave written informed consent that their narratives could be used in the research report. As per institutional requirement, we applied for and were granted ethical clearance to undertake this study.

Data generation and analysis

Data were generated over four years using four reflective exercises and four semi-structured interviews. The participants’ reflections were written in response to prompts about
their experiences of inclusion and exclusion on campus and their intentionality to question and challenge university culture. The reflective exercises entailed introspection and created an opportunity to understand their place in the social world and be the authors of their own stories (cf. Park, 2013). Through reflection, the participants gave voice to their own experiences. Over four years, each reflective exercise was used as the point of departure for the follow-up semi-structured interview that lasted more or less an hour per participant. Whereas the data from the first year focused on the participants’ community narratives, the data generated over the last three years were focused on their institutional narratives.

We used inductive thematic analysis to identify and analyse themes that represented ‘some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set[s]’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Bandura’s social cognitive theory and the critical emancipatory theory served as a theoretical lens to explore how the narratives illustrate characteristics of human agency using transformative opportunities for agentic action. To ensure reliability during data generation, the first author listened to the participants’ lived experiences, developed a relationship of trust with the participants over four years, and encouraged them to voice their unique experiences (cf. Polkinghorne, 2007). The participants had the opportunity to read each transcribed text to verify the accuracy of their narratives. To ensure the validity of the data analysis, we followed a verstehen approach (objective comprehension), which assisted us to transcend ‘historical circumstances to reproduce the meaning or intention of the actor’ (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192).

Results

Student experiences and the claiming of agentic opportunities

In the following section, we link together different episodes of human agency relating to language and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) consciousness, respectively. Whereas Nomsa’s and Otsile’s narratives present different and unique storylines, their stories have one thing in common: the interrelated dynamics of identity, power, and agency. To illustrate the appearance of agency in the interplay of power and identity (cf. Sherman & Teemant, 2021), we present Nomsa’s and Otsile’s stories by replacing our voices with their voices in the form of verbatim quotations (cf. McGarrigle, 2018).

Nomsa: agency and language consciousness

Although Nomsa grew up in an isiXhosa-speaking household, the language spoken in her community was Afrikaans. At school, Nomsa spoke both Afrikaans and English. Growing up, language was never an issue, for ‘we were already settled into the whole Afrikaans thing’. Although Nomsa identifies with the Xhosa culture and isiXhosa as home language, her exposure to different cultures and traditions has led her to ‘respect other religions, cultures, languages, races, and people with different sexual orientations than mine’. As a child, the message in her household instilled a strong sense of respect for others.

Enrolling at university meant entering a space of self-reflection, critique, and taking responsibility for personal perceptions and positioning (cf. Boler & Zembylas, 2003;
Nomsa recalls that ‘one of the challenges I remember facing me at the university was the language’. Whereas her past experiences with languages were positive, Nomsa had to adapt to a new linguistic context: while English was used as the medium of instruction, the majority of students spoke Setswana on campus.

Her institutional narratives illustrate how language can be used as a barrier of difference and exclusion while positioning her in terms of ‘otherness’. Nomsa was eager to join the choir in her first year on campus, but to her surprise, ‘they were only singing in Setswana… I took the decision to stop singing because to me, it was difficult to sing when I did not know the meaning of the songs’. She thought the choir was ‘not inclusive enough’, and had a similar experience when she wanted to join the drama group: ‘they were mostly speaking Setswana’. Through her reflection on language practices on campus, Nomsa developed a critical awareness of how the marginalisation of language groups informs choices and perpetuates exclusion (cf. Freire, 1990). She recognised how ‘Afrikaans-speaking people are afraid to join the choir because they know they will have a language barrier’ and observed several instances of language intolerance on campus. Although the student crowd during African Day on campus spoke mainly Setswana, speeches were made in other languages as well; however, ‘the minute that this one boy read out an Afrikaans speech, the crowd was negative’. According to Nomsa, it has become the norm that posts in Setswana and English on the institutional Facebook page are accepted, ‘but if someone else with another language comes in and expresses themselves, there is a problem’.

Nomsa’s narrative illustrates an interplay of past experiences with a multilingual context of ‘[a]t home we mix the languages’, her present judgement of language intolerance on campus, and an imagined future (cf. Priestley et al., 2015). In reflection, Nomsa realised that the notion of Setswana being ‘more important than other languages is based on power and peer pressure’. It was within this context that she adopted an agentic orientation and pursued agentic possibility (cf. Klemenčić, 2015) during her first year to act: ‘I told myself, before I complete my studies, I have to teach myself Setswana’. Nomsa’s intentionality to learn Setswana was seemingly rooted in self-motivation, and through forethought, she took action (cf. Bandura, 2001) by taking a conversational course in Setswana and by ‘choosing Setswana friends, who helped me learn Setswana’. Through self-regulation and strong self-efficacy, Nomsa empowered herself by becoming fluent in Setswana after two years on campus. Although Nomsa empowered herself, she also started to see herself as someone who ‘could at some stage make a difference’, not by telling others to learn a language: ‘I learn the language first and now they will also try to do what I did’. With her newly gained knowledge and skills, coupled with her strong intrapersonal identity, Nomsa was able to act as an agent of change for marginalised language groups. When she joined the choir in her third year, she could sing Setswana songs and challenged the power relations among the students by introducing the choir to isiXhosa and Afrikaans songs. Nomsa’s critical awareness of oppressive practices on campus motivated her to use songs in minority languages to empower linguistically marginalised students: ‘they enjoyed learning Afrikaans and isiXhosa songs – it was something new for them’. Her irritation with an instructor during a coaching workshop posing questions in Setswana, while there were several students who spoke other languages, moved her personal agency to take action on behalf of others. When she asked a question in isiXhosa, her response to students’ complaints was: ‘what’s wrong,
let us all express ourselves in our own languages’. The matter was resolved with the decision that everyone should pose their questions in English. Although personal agency does not necessarily influence social practices, Nomsa’s self-efficacy fed into agentic actions based on strong motivational, cognitive, and affective intervention (cf. Bandura, 1989).

Nomsa illustrates agency by learning Setswana and being sensitive to other languages. Whereas her personal agency assisted in personal empowerment to navigate the university environment, Nomsa used agentic actions to position a dominant language as an intermediary among different social groups defined by different home languages. However, it should be noted that Nomsa first had to assimilate linguistically before her initial self-empowerment evolved into the empowerment of others. Cologen (2019) regards assimilation as sameness, thus the opposite of inclusion. By implication, Nomsa’s continued experience of linguistic exclusion might point to a misinterpretation of university inclusion as assimilation. The concern in this regard is a focus on changing students to fit into a context, or as aptly noted by Faines (2014, p. 14), the ‘creation of a homogenous ideology in a space that often forces one group to give up pieces of themselves in order to be fully integrated into the majority space’. For Slee (2013, p. 905), the challenge is to ‘learn how to detect, understand and dismantle exclusion’. Whereas Nomsa remained in a linguistically subordinate position, her narratives illustrate linguistic assimilation as a tactic to create temporary moments of agency (cf. De Certeau, 1984).

**Otsile: agency and a critical awareness of the LGBT agenda**

Growing up as a child, Otsile experienced loss. At an early age, the family was abandoned by his father. At the age of eight, Otsile lost his mother too after a two-year struggle with cancer. Her suffering made an impression on Otsile, and when she passed, ‘I felt robbed that I had to lose my mother at such a tender young age’. In addition to personal loss, Otsile witnessed how poor management and leadership led to the closure of the youth centre and how the increase of the crime rate in his community was justified by ‘[e]xcuses such as there is no work or if there are tenders putting out, they would not get hired’. At a young age, Otsile developed a critical awareness of the surrounding socio-cultural conditions and made the decision to become a role model because ‘I am that particular person who hates seeing other people suffering or lacking’. Otsile’s cognitive consciousness of how socio-cultural conditions shape people’s lives, and his reflection on his lived experiences served as an important impetus for self-motivation and a commitment to action (cf. Bandura, 2001; Freire, 1990). For Otsile, coming from a poor community is an advantage ‘because there is [sic] a lot of projects that I am involved [in] back at home’. In recognition of his ability to become a change agent and fuelled by self-reactiveness and reflectiveness (cf. Bandura, 2001), Otsile remained involved in community work: ‘I am an active member of the community and every time when I go home, I participate in the Love Life project and the mentorship programmes’.

Otsile’s critical awareness of his surroundings and his understanding of how stereotypical beliefs can feed into oppressive practices are foregrounded in his institutional narrative. During his first year on campus, a module on identity and diversity made a huge impression on Otsile’s understanding of the marginalisation of social identities. He
recalls how information on ‘bigotry … totally changed my observation on race and slaughtered those generalisations’. His ability to reflect on and critically engage with his own pre-conceived perceptions led to the realisation that his idea of coloured people as violent ‘was really a stupid perception because today, some of them are even my friends’. Otsile’s development of social consciousness played an important role in motivating him to question the marginalisation of people on campus (cf. Freire, 1990). During his first year, Otsile started to notice ‘the LBGT community [on campus] … is oppressed or marginalised’. As a heterosexual person, he grappled with the idea of ‘what will I do if I have a gay child, and this made me reflect’. Driven by intentionality, rooted in self-motivation, and forethought as a guide towards action (cf. Bandura, 2001), Otsile started to gather more information about the LGBT community. He attended a HEAIDS (Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme) workshop, which equipped him with knowledge and skills to become more conscious of oppressive practices against LGBT students. Such knowledge and skills served as a drive towards self-empowerment, becoming an ally to the LGBT community, and acting as a change agent (cf. Almeida et al., 2016; Freire, 1990).

Otsile’s narrative illustrates how the development of agency coincides with an interplay of past experiences, present judgement, and future predictions (cf. Klemenčič, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). Whereas reflection on past experiences and witnessing hardship in his community motivated Otsile to remain involved in community projects, his engagement with and judgement of oppressive practices on campus enacted a strong agentic orientation towards action. In reflection, Otsile recognises that discrimination against the LGBT community stems from ‘how we as [a] society socialise our children’. This insight, coupled with the intended goal to ‘portray a message of education – educate my peers about things they or society may view as a right’, fed into agentic possibility. Grounded in his Christian belief to ‘accommodate and accept everybody as they are’, and rooted in self-motivation, Otsile became a voice for the LGBT community. As a heterosexual person, Otsile could not identify as an LGBT person, but became an ally to this marginalised group. Sumerau et al. (2020) illustrate how the construction of allyship, motivated by creating an impression of support, may perpetuate inequality. In the case of Otsile, allyship meant experiencing assumptions and allegations from fellow students that he is gay. For him, allyship was constituted by a strong identification with LGBT students’ struggle against marginalisation when he noticed in his fourth year that ‘we [our emphasis] are moving fast … 3 of our [our emphasis] candidates for the SRC were of the LGBT community’. He revealed, ‘We [our emphasis] have been pushing and educating the students to accept one another.’ Despite assumptions about his sexual orientation, Otsile continued to foster a strong sense of confidence in his ability to change lives. His continued commitment to challenging oppressive practices and his strong sense of self-efficacy are aligned with Bandura’s (2001) observation that people motivate themselves to take action towards desired outcomes.

Otsile sees himself as an agent of change and believes in change and continued influence on other people’s lives. With regard to discrimination, Otsile feels that ‘we must make a noise, must take actions, must report it and follow the protocol so that whoever the culprit is, may have [sic] the repercussions of his or her actions’. His narrative illustrates how practical empowerment can develop through knowledge of
oppressive practices and the capacity to become actively involved in self-reflective and intentional action with the social context (cf. O’Meara, 2013).

**Discussion and implications**

Nomsa’s and Otsile’s stories are uniquely personal and do not represent the stories of other students. However, their stories foreground two closely related observations. The first observation pertains to university spaces being troubled contexts with opportunities for agentic action. Globally, university spaces are characterised by ongoing marginalisation and exclusion of social identities (Clowes et al., 2017). Students find themselves in social groups where asymmetrical power relations, linked with categories of otherness, lead to experiences of marginalisation and exclusion (Tatum, 2013). Nomsa’s narrative illustrates how language can become a barrier of difference when a dominant language is used to marginalise minority language groups. Otsile’s narrative foregrounds the marginalisation of students whose sexual orientation is not aligned with heteronormativity. However, their narratives also illustrate how a space characterised by dominant and subordinate social structures can open up transformative opportunities for agentic action. Lingering in the temporal contingencies of engaged moments, transformative opportunities can either be claimed through agentic actions or simply become undetectable in temporal-relational contexts (Klemenčić, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). Whereas Nomsa experienced marginalisation as a member of a minority language group, Otsile did not experience marginalisation as a heterosexual person. Instead, Otsile witnessed the oppression of members of the LGBT community.

Both students were confronted with the choice to either perpetuate the status quo or to act on and interact with the oppressive social context in which they found themselves. Instead of accepting her subordinate status as a non-Setswana-speaking student, Nomsa opted for an agentic orientation to empower herself and those around her. By implication, when she decided to learn Setswana, Nomsa opted for linguistic assimilation to claim a transformative opportunity. While Nomsa started to reflect on asymmetrical power relations on campus, she began to draw on her past experiences with and respect for cultures and traditions different from her own. Through her engagement with oppressive language practices on a multilingual campus, Nomsa developed a critical awareness that fed into a will to act and interact. Nomsa’s narrative illustrates how a transformative moment can be utilised for agentic action. Otsile too made a deliberate choice to act out against oppressive practices. In drawing on a value system infused with the belief that all people are equal and should not suffer, Otsile started to deconstruct his preconceived ideas of others (cf. Solorzano & Bernal, 2011). In developing a critical and reflective awareness of the marginalisation of the LGBT community, Otsile utilised his knowledge, skills, and resources to empower himself. Both Nomsa and Otsile took responsibility for their positionality and developed a strong sense of agency through intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (cf. Bandura, 2001). Confidence in their agentic abilities assisted both students in giving voice to and becoming the voice of the voiceless.

The second observation follows from the first. Higher education in South Africa is known for its transformative agenda and regular student protests. The transformation of higher education is centred on, inter alia, principles of equity, redress,
democratisation, diversity, social cohesion, and social inclusion (Department of Higher Education and Training, 1997). Student protests, however, illustrate a disillusionment with transformation and depict that ‘[m]any universities and academics had long lost the appetite or intensity for transformation and quest for social justice’ (Makhanya, 2019). As noted, student protests foreground the importance of student voice in opening up spaces to the presence of students (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mpatlanyane, 2018). Our argument, however, is that the recognition of student voice should not be reliant on large-scale student protests and student voices echoing through the corridors of university spaces. The narratives in this study tell a story of how student voice can expose and challenge institutional culture and raise critical awareness of marginalisation in the temporal-relational contexts in which students find themselves. Although Nomsa and Otsile’s narratives are uniquely their own, they illustrate how a strong sense of self, coupled with knowledge and practical skills, can contribute towards change in the relatively small circles in which they move.

Whereas student protests depict collective and reactive student agency, it can be accepted that Nomsa’s and Otsile’s individual agency was also, to some extent, reactive. Nomsa actively responded to her own experience of marginalisation, and through reflection, intentionality, and forethought, she decided to take action. However, in drawing on Bandura’s (1999) reference that agency can be reactive, generative, and proactive, we argue that Nomsa’s individual agency did not remain reactive but became generative. Her individual agency and self-empowerment developed into practical empowerment throughout her four years on campus when other students started to benefit from her agentic actions. By introducing songs in other languages to the choir and voicing her irritation during a coaching session, she challenged the practice of language exclusion and contributed, by implication, to the development of language consciousness and cultural competence. While those who exclude others by using a language not understood by everybody are positioned to develop an awareness of such exclusion, students who are being excluded can maintain cultural integrity through the recognition of their languages (Ladson-Billing, 1995). In the case of Otsile, his initial individual agency developed from an observation of oppressive practices. Whereas Otsile’s agentic actions seemed to be initially reactively inspired, his continued pushing of the LGBT community’s agenda for inclusion alludes to generative agency. Otsile’s agentic actions illustrate a process over four years involving his negotiation of the university context and finding ways of educating his peers to see, acknowledge, and appreciate diversity.

Although we agree that the assumption of agency does not guarantee change, we argue that the potential for change lies in listening to the voice of agentic students. Students’ agentic actions within the everyday university context have the potential for change from within in such context. By acknowledging the university as a space of intense self-reflection and critique (cf. Soudien 2010) and drawing on students’ critique of oppressive practices on campus, student agency can evolve into proactive agency. Agentic actions as a reactive response to oppressive practices reflect on institutional culture and highlight the potential for institutions to address change from within, and not as a top-down approach driven by institutional policies and transformation plans. In this sense, student agency has the potential to become proactive; when the presence of students is acknowledged and agentic actions are incorporated as co-constituents of social justice, student protests would no longer be the first opportunity for students to
be heard. By acknowledging student voice, institutions can involve student agency in modelling a society that looks different from the social context in which students find themselves.

This article illustrates that while experiences of marginalisation are a common feature of student life, a combination of power and will can serve as an impetus for students to take responsibility for a positive campus experience. Nomsa’s and Otsile’s narratives are uniquely their own, yet they illustrate how agency can bridge power and identity towards agentic action (cf. Sherman & Teemant, 2021). Nomsa experienced how asymmetrical power relations limit (linguistic) identity, and Otsile observed the limiting of sexual identity. In both their narratives, identity became a source of resistance as they grasped agentic opportunities as they emerged from the interplay between power and identity. Although their narratives do not represent the experiences of other students, we believe they serve as reminders of other silent narratives that critique and challenge oppressive practices on campus and, by implication, institutional culture. We do not claim that these two students’ agentic actions are changing institutional culture; however, their narratives illustrate the potential of raising consciousness of asymmetrical power relations and issues of marginalisation on campus. We conclude this article by reaffirming the importance of listening to students’ narratives and acknowledging the role of student agency in assessing and engaging with issues of social justice on a diverse university campus.

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