

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Sisterhood in Academia - Storying our Experiences in Higher Education

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Abstract

Breaking the barriers for women in higher education institutions has been on the global agenda for over a decade. Women's lived experiences in academia has notably focused on issues of inequality and systemic gendered barriers that lead to women opting out of academia. This study acknowledges that many black women academics feel caged and overlooked in their positions and argues that despite these challenges, women are resilient and need to carve out spaces to navigate their paths in the academy. Using the autoethnography inquiry approach, we reflect on how our experiences shaped our academic journey in higher education institutions. The principles of Communities of Practice (CoP) is adopted as a framework underpinning this paper. It is envisaged that this framework will help examine the challenges and opportunities black women academics experience in higher education. Our reflective discussion on the sisterhood we embraced during our academic journeys has suggested that institutions need to provide mentorship opportunities, and spaces to talk, support and be supported.

Keywords: communities of practice; higher education; resilience; sisterhood; women

Introduction

Black women academics experience many limitations including discrimination, limited mentorship opportunities, inequalities at work, unequal distribution of daily tasks, bullying and microaggressions. We hope that our reflective narratives will shed light on black women academics' plight as little or nothing is said about the struggle they encounter with academic progression and how policies and practices in higher education institutions (HEIs) tend to be biased towards them. For that purpose, we explore the lived experiences of black women academics in a male-dominated environment. We seek to address the gender gap in the academic world and also offer coping mechanisms along the academic path to assist emerging and established black women academics find their balance in the male-dominated world. In this paper, we aim to contribute to an understanding of how black women academics experience career success; how the choices and challenges impact our career advancement; how we self-define and reclaim the power within academic structures designed to keep us marginalised, and how we need to push back to take up space and level the playing fields in academia. We reflect on how we navigate academia as emerging black women academics. We adopted an autoethnographic approach to narrate our academic journeys and personal experiences within academia. Through the philosophy of sisterhood, we tell our story of how women academics are resilient and how we traverse systematic barriers to carve out spaces to navigate our paths and succeed in academia. The reflections highlight the constraining and enabling encounters in our academic journeys.

The paper is organised into five sections that provide an overview of our lived experiences as women academics in HEIs in South Africa. The first section provides background literature on the experiences of women academics in HEIs and the conceptual orientation of resilience. The reflections on our personal and academic journeys are narrated in section two. Section three provides a theoretical orientation of CoPs that frames our discussion. The methodological choice of autoethnography is discussed in section four. Finally, the discussions of the findings

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using the sisterhood philosophy provide insight into how we became agents of change in our place of work. While the representation of women in the workplace has improved over the years, the key constraints to women's career progression and development are still related to gender inequity, particularly in places of power (Slaughter, 2015; Tabassum and Nayak, 2021). This is also true of higher education in South Africa. There is increasing literature about the experiences of women academics in HEIs (Maphalala and Mpofo, 2017; Mankayi and Cheteni, 2021; Mbukanma and Strydom, 2022). However, to understand women academics' lived experiences in the higher education context, it is critical to first understand the historical background of the South African higher education system. Since the 1994 political transition, South African higher education has presented varied structure and system changes to align itself with global higher education settings. In its presentation, Higher Education of South Africa (HESA, 2011) noted challenges in women's academic representation, particularly for black women academics. Although the number of women academics in South African HEIs has increased since 1994, women are still underrepresented, particularly in senior positions in HEIs (HESA, 2011; Tshipani, 2021).

In a comprehensive literature survey on studies conducted in South African universities, Maphalala and Mpofo, (2017) noted that while women academics have achieved notable successes under the transformative framework of the post-apartheid higher education legislation, the South African higher education system is still prejudiced against women, and women find themselves forced to compromise essential aspects of their identity and livelihood to accommodate a career in academia. According to the authors, this prejudices women against taking up, pursuing and remaining in higher education leadership. Women's voices in telling their experiences and transforming the system seem to be significantly absent (Maphalala and Mpofo, 2017). In this paper, we share the same view that change is needed if HEIs are to succeed in recruiting and retaining women in academia. According to the 2020 dataset from the Higher Education Data Analyser, Mbukanma and Strydom (2022) observed that between 2015 and 2019, women in permanent positions represented 48.2% of all employment in HEIs in South Africa. This is significant compared to the 1992 figure, in which women represented 30% of all permanent academic staff in HEIs (Boshoff, 2005: 363). Despite this increase, this paper advocates for improved policies and strategies that are inclusive of women's academic journeys. Many scholars argue that the lack of adequate support for women in academia is one of the main challenges associated with the retention of women academics and academic leaders in HEIs (Maodzwa-Taruvinga and Divala, 2014; Shepherd, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2018). A significant theme in a phenomenological study conducted by Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) in three universities in the Eastern Cape in South Africa on the lived experiences of women deans, found similar patterns of gender stereotyping, lack of support and disregard of women's intersectional circumstances as serious barriers hindering successful leadership by the women deans.

O'Connell and McKinnon (2021), while focusing on advancement barriers of academic women in HEIs, raise a poignant issue that transcends disciplines and double standards. They argue that while women in various sectors of the academy are pressured to 'superwomen' levels of performance, they still experience double standards in terms of treatment, reception of their ideas, and career advancement (O'Connell and McKinnon, 2021: 5). Shober (2014) noted how the inevitable intersections of race and gender in South Africa contribute to women's employability, promotability, publish-ability and access to research funding. In support of these views, Dehdarirad *et al.* (2015) suggest that women generally experience having a greater teaching load, a lower degree of specialisation and academic rank, and they encounter obstacles in accessing research funds. Paths to promotion or senior positions are also mostly dominated by men thereby making it difficult for women to spearhead research, publish in top-rated journals or acquire research grants. Moreover, research has indicated that women are unjustly underrepresented in higher education and generally when they are appointed, the majority occupy junior positions (Dlamini and Adams, 2014; Maphalala and Mpofo, 2017). These views show that women in academia continue to experience direct or indirect systematic barriers from entry throughout their academic journey.

The challenges of women in STEM have been widely acknowledged in the literature, with authors emphasising the role of representation and stereotyping, where 'Science' is continuously being viewed as a men's domain, with only women with 'superwoman' capabilities able to mildly comprehend it (O'Connell and McKinnon, 2021). In an inaugural address at the Association for Women in Science (AWIS), Fitzpatrick (2012) lamented the challenges surrounding the 3Rs for women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, academic medicine) (STEMM) asserting that they faced recruitment, resilience and retainment challenges. Her observations on challenges for women in science, both the big and the small science, rings true in many HEI contexts around the world. Also concerning, according to Maphalala and Mpofo (2017: 249) is that "the low percentage of women on selection committees or in the academic assessment systems means that factors that especially affect women have

traditionally been ignored.” These challenges are not only exclusive to women in STEM; through our narratives, we reflect on how we and other women academics across the disciplines continue to experience some of these barriers and obstacles in our academic development and progression.

In a more recent study, Cheung (2021) noted that women-led HEIs across the world had risen to 19.5% in 2020. According to Cheung (2021: 6), the advancement of women academics is uniformly constrained by the work-family balance; the synchronisation of matrimony and having children with the tenure clock; the socialisation of femininity that departs from patriarchal opinions of professionalism and leadership capability, and cultural barriers grounded in various local contexts. A study in Brazil also noted how the professional advancement of women in academia are hindered by gender stereotypes, institutional microaggressions and micro-violence (Barros and Mourao, 2020). Mbukanma and Strydom (2022) have made similar observations within the South African higher education system, where women’s advancement in academic careers remains sub-optimal. Similarly, a study conducted in the Middle Eastern countries of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to assess the effects of capacity building in higher education, revealed the need for comprehensive support and mentorship opportunities for women academics, academic leaders and administrators (Kaissi *et al.*, 2019). They suggest employing a “socio-ecological model to boost women’s ambitions and enhance their capabilities to reach higher positions” (Kaissi *et al.*, 2019: 3). Such support is pertinent in a context like South Africa, where the intersectionality perspective of women academics highlights additional needs and challenges. Mentorship within our institutions is important to help us navigate the nuances of institutional expectations, policies, practices, and procedures.

While the progressive improvement, albeit slow, is acknowledged, Mbukanma and Strydom (2022: 52) noted the prevalence and resilience of barriers to women’s academic advancement. These include gender-blind institutional frameworks, workplace harassment, patriarchal models, and unfair recruitment practices, among domestic and personal challenges (low self-esteem, imposter syndrome, and lack of motivation). Patriarchy can be defined as an ideology that advances or elevates men to status and leadership positions, without regard for their ability, qualifications and potential (Dlamini and Adams, 2014). Morley (2014) suggests that gender has a negative impact on women’s academic and professional identities and a lack of opportunities to develop academic capital, and the fact that women’s professional and academic capital are devalued and misrecognised in the knowledge economy affects women’s academic careers (Morley, 2006).

Conceptualising Resilience

Resilience, a term borrowed from natural and physical sciences, has been appropriated to career studies to explain processes in which individuals endure in the face of challenges. According to Fitzpatrick (2012: 1), sociologists defined resilience as “...the ability to absorb disturbances, to be changed and then to re-organise and still have the same identity (retain the same basic structure and ways of functioning).” While it is unfortunate that women attempting to enter and stay in the academic sector need disproportionately more resilience than their male counterparts due to the duplicity of most higher education systems, resilience would seem to be a necessary tool in the hyper-competitive contemporary labour markets, even within academia. Fitzpatrick (2012: 2) observes that “Negative reactions to a paper, presentation, proposal or a project’s outcome have to be absorbed in a way that does not diminish the ability to respond successfully to future perturbations.” According to Dodbiba (2022), the ability to ‘flourish under adversity’ is not only a part of life but essential for growth, development and success. The author argues that resilience has been incorporated by many organisations and is in many cases part of their culture. As such, this is demanded at the individual level and expected at the organisational level, given various shocks endemic in the world of business. Every individual’s resilience capacity emanates from own resources (genetics, personality), social networks (family and community) as well as organisational support systems (unit) (Dodbiba, 2022). Regardless of the significant adversity, the demonstration of resilience will be determined largely by the resources from which the individual employees draw. If an employee has weak resources, even the weakest of shocks can have a significant negative performance impact. Dodbiba’s views enunciate the potential value of staff supporting one another, forming CoPs and sister-scholar relationships in higher education. These enabling factors will be discussed in great detail later on in this paper

In a study focusing on resilience and gender, Sojo and Wood (2012: 7) argue that “women are considered resilient when they can fit in, function and grow in a work environment that poses risks to their well-being and performance.” For them to “fit in” women have to have a certain attitude towards the work environment, as well as receive a reciprocal attitude. Most work contexts are trigger points for women since they face discriminatory frameworks, microaggressions and unequal treatment in hiring and retention, pay, and career advancement. As such, if these

challenges are not properly addressed and rectified, women may be forced to cope to survive a hostile work environment. According to Sojo, there are different levels of resilience depending on the type of work environment. In overtly oppressive contexts, women may just “fit”, and in a more flexible space, they can “function”, while in a freer professional environment, women “grow” (Sojo and Wood, 2012: 11). In this paper, we recognise that to be successful in HEIs, women academics must navigate through the twists and turns of systematic and structural barriers. While academia is not necessarily a preserve of male workers, the late arrival and continuous exclusion of women academics make their career trajectories and development compromised in comparison to men. As such, most women academics negatively adjust to the ‘men’-made shocks, leading to frustrated career paths and shortened academic leadership periods. We maintain that women in academia share common experiences of succeeding through adversity. As a result of the social contexts in which we work if we want to see social and economic equality and succeed in academia, then we must act as agents of our empowerment. The recounting of our experiences in the following section aims to offer our stories and how we have redefined our space as a means to navigate our academic journeys.

Our Story – Reimagining Belonging in the Academy

We narrate our stories not only as black women in academia but as mothers, wives, friends, sisters and educators. These identities not only define our role as educators who work in higher education but, our social identities as family and community members. Our social engagement and cultural ideological views reflect our identities and social roles as black women in academia.

Dr G is in her early forties. She has worked in the non-governmental organisation and education sector for the past 15 years. Her research interests include academic literacies in higher education, higher education teaching and learning, social responsibility in higher education, writing centre pedagogy and social science research.

Dr K is also in her forties and holds qualifications in the education sector. Dr K’s research interests include first-year students’ experience, academic literacies, social cohesion and social justice, and student support initiatives. A former educator, Dr K is dedicated to inspiring students’ academic success and believes that all students should get the support they need through the development of inclusive student engagement practices.

Some women are fortunate to find friends with whom to travel the often-lonely academic journey. In this paper, we narrate the shared relationship and experiences since our appointment at a university of technology in South Africa while pursuing our doctoral careers.

It was there in a chilly climate interview waiting room that we first met. This was before our recruitment interviews in the boardroom of the vice-chancellor. Standing among a room of interview candidates, we somehow connected – initially through a light conversation about where we were from the work that we were previously involved in and of course, the nervousness we were feeling. A few months later, we met again as we were both appointed to manage academic support units at different campuses at the university. We were excited about the opportunity to work together, and we somehow knew that it was to be a long-lasting friendship.

Through the years, we spent many hours reflecting on our praxis, attended numerous academic training sessions and conferences, conducted research together and most significantly we listened to and supported each other. Gradually, we became more comfortable and content and developed a mutual relationship that enabled a sharing of our lives in and outside of the academy. During this time, we started pursuing our different research interests – one in education studies having studied and practised in South Africa and the UK and the other in social sciences and higher education studies. While each of us recognised the other as dependable, we soon realised that participating in staff meetings and interactions with various faculties, members of the university community and students was oftentimes lonely and daunting. Something was missing, a sense of belonging and sisterhood. We were yearning for someone with a shared understanding of life as women in academia - a sisterhood of support, validation, loyalty, and trust, stemming from our shared understanding of life as women in academia. Through our shared experiences of navigating institutional barriers, we established a bond of sisterhood based on resiliency and commonality. “A critical component for the formation of the sister-scholar relationship is the black feminist understanding of sisterhood. Black women educators, scholars, mothers, intellectuals, and activists have been a force

of justice and social reform for decades—creating collaborative networks in sisterhood to uplift themselves, their children, and their communities” (Turner and Allen, 2022: 4).

The ‘tacit’ bonds of sisterhood stem from shared domination and oppression (Collins, 1989) and are “deeply rooted in black women’s cultural ways of being” (Turner and Allen, 2022: 4). Dr G explains that “Finding a sister scholar means having someone to confide in with whom one shares a tacit understanding of one’s standpoint. We have come to realise that this understanding can manifest in a simple look across the table at a colleague’s inappropriate comment in a meeting or can emerge in an after-hours sister talk where we process, support, deliberate and confide with one another.” The compounding layers of systemic domination from both within and outside of the academic sector, make it vital for women to have a space to talk, laugh, cry, regenerate and heal. Dr G expounds that “Within this space, our sisterhood transcends the sometimes-repressive constructs of academia and comprises our multifaceted “full selves”—socially, our spiritual being, and emotional and mental state.” Dr K illustrates how these networks or bonds empower women academics, “Sister talks can be described as an opportunity of gathering the whole self—a way to shape our plans and build resilience. This was particularly relevant for us as we both were pursuing doctoral degrees when we met. Within the refuge of our sisterhood, we share experiential knowledge forged in our lives as women and scholars.”

In as much as we both assiduously engage with literature and current research in our selected fields, we realise that our reflective conversations offer validation of our experiences, and are a generative space in which we learn, grow and co-create knowledge. Dr K affirms that “In this space, each of us learns from the other and builds upon the knowledge of the other. Our sister-scholar relationship cultivates generative energy in which we develop ideas and understandings as we each draw from our separate pools of knowledge to contribute to shared understanding.” Reflection is key in not only connecting past and present but in improving future experiences for ourselves and others. Dr G maintains that “It is only when we retell our day-to-day encounters do we get to fully connect and know ourselves and the achievements we accomplished despite the constraining factors. Unless we publish our narratives, our stories and experiences remain silent.”

From these experiences, we have come to value and understand our sisterhood as a safe space made “for us, by us”. “Within our sister-scholar relationship, it is common practice for us to call the other to mull over an idea or share a recent experience of microaggression and divulge our hopes and worries,” expresses Dr G. Within this space, we rejuvenate towards collaboration, support and transformation (Taylor, 1998; Davis, 2018, Turner and Allen, 2022). Working collaboratively is our attempt to break free of institutional cages that foster surveillance and isolation while in the academy. Institutional microaggressions are often experienced and can be subtle acts that demean and discriminate against marginalised groups (Sue, 2010; Torino *et al.*, 2019). In recounting episodes of microaggressions in the academy Dr K explains “We have experienced many instances of a person regularly interrupting when one is trying to explain a concept and we have experienced others’ taking credit for another’s idea or concept.” Our higher education environment is also often riddled with microaggressions in the form of a microinsult or repeatedly insensitive comments based on one’s social status. These behaviours are difficult to address as people are unaware of their implicit bias and the influence of microaggressions in intensifying gender inequalities in the academic sector (Dovidio, 2001; Colligan and Higgins, 2006) and inhibit work performance, morale and productivity.

The marginalisation of women within academia is further affirmed by Dr K who recalled how women’s contributions or views are often overlooked or shut down by male counterparts during meeting engagements. This demonstrates how women’s voices, especially black women, continue to be unheard and ignored within higher education spaces. “We find ourselves having to fight for recognition and acknowledgement - traits that are common in shared stories of microaggression.” Critical to this understanding is the culture of power relations embedded within our HEIs. Dr G adds to this view: “A male academic is unlikely to notice when a female academic is consistently overlooked and is unlikely to understand the female academic’s reaction. This culture of power makes women feel insecure, unsafe, disrespected, unseen, and marginalised.” These experiences highlight the systemic biases and the need to redress equity within academia. Dr K maintains that issues of inequity should be addressed throughout the university community “What is needed is an institutional commitment to bring implicit bias to the fore, we need to eliminate unfair, unethical expression and this can be done through sustained mandatory workshops that are attended by the academic faculty and leadership alike.”

As we reflect on our interactions from our contemplations of an envisaged research project, book paper or journal article to hiking plans with family, we realise that our sister-scholar relationship allows us to fully engage with each

other at the intersections of our social identities. As affirmed by Turner and Allen (2022: 11) “As black women, wives, and mothers who are also scholars, we cannot exuviate our various social roles, responsibilities, and identities at the door of the institution. Instead, we carry the fullness of ourselves, our families, and our communities into our work, which influence our scholarship and are in turn influenced by our scholarship.” We recognise that our association enables the development of both knowledge fostering sustenance and a deeper understanding of both our scholarship and womanhood. We recognise the dialogic space within the relationship as a space of kinship rooted in our distinct desire to succeed in academia.

The sister-scholar relationship is a free, safe, dialogic space that helps replenish the parts of us that are sometimes washed out as a result of inequality and systemic gendered barriers in higher education. Dr G maintains that “The higher education environment can be professionally lonely and isolating. As a result, and to survive, I often turn to literature to inspire me about the spirit and legacy of the resilience of women. I reflect on the life histories of women in my own life such as my mum and grandmother who had little to no formal education but instilled in me the resilience to craft a space to thrive in the world. In these communities that we created, we often share these feelings of isolation and lean on each other to regenerate.” This space enables a (re)generation of the energy and readiness needed to resist marginalisation and isolation and transform our day-to-day encounters in the higher education sector. Dr K expounds on the value of sisterhood explaining that “Without sister-scholar connections, my community would be small and my opportunity for success limited.”

As we navigate these male-dominated academic spaces, we continue to experience challenges, one of which is in research development and postgraduate supervision. Institutional structures force us to join academic departments to supervise postgraduate students as we are both from an academic support unit. “We have struggled to locate ourselves within these academic spaces that are not inclusive and welcoming; we find ourselves isolated from the academic departments and other collaborative projects, yet we know we have meaningful contributions to make” Dr K explained. These prove to be some of the subtle ways of excluding women from accessing and participating meaningfully in research engagements in HEIs. To a certain extent, this has hindered our application for academic promotions. We have found the process challenging and biased toward practitioners who are not directly positioned within teaching departments.

In this section, we reflected on the affirmation, support, and encouragement we have provided each other through our academic trajectory. In the next section, we further our discussion on academic sisterhood by exploring the value of Communities of Practice in the higher education sector and how these flexible spaces can be used by women to offer support and be supported.

Theoretical Framework – Communities of Practice and Academic Sisterhood

Many women feel caged in their respective positions within the academy (van Rensburg, 2021). Women academics experience a myriad of challenges including institutional micro-aggressions, stereotyping, lack of mentorship opportunities and isolation in the workplace. Today, an important theory of social learning is Wenger’s theory of Communities of Practice (CoP). CoP shares similarities with the sister-scholar relationship in that it enables women to work in supportive collaborative spaces. As the theory of socially mediated learning suggests, a supportive community, where colleagues listen and value individual opinions can develop self-confidence (Lave and Wenger, 1991). CoP is a means of developing social capital, sharing and nurturing new knowledge in an organisation and thus can be valuable in nurturing women to take up spaces in academia.

A CoP can be regarded as a group of people with common interests, working together in a responsible way to develop new ideas and promote learning and development (Wenger, 2010). A CoP can be used by people who work together to make sense of what they do, how they do it and develop collective knowledge through shared practice or situated learning. Working within a CoP enabled us as novice academics starting up an academic support unit to lean on each other, share ideas and gain new knowledge. The benefits of CoP are that they enable the facilitation of the knowledge processes, including the sharing, transfer, creation and dissemination of knowledge. The categorisation of CoP that distinguishes it from teams is that CoPs are voluntarily formed by like-minded people with a common goal or interest, and it is not initiated by the organisation – it is formed and function outside of institutional hierarchies. This is significant for women academics who often yearn for the tacit bonds of sisterhood to feel supported in what has been historically regarded as a male preserve.

CoP can be used as a strategy to enhance confidence, self-esteem and research productivity and ultimately improve the representation of women in leadership and senior positions in the higher education arena. Our learnings from working in a CoP are that it enables us to develop new ideas, encourages collaboration, and enhances our sense of belonging in our department and at the institution. We often develop new project plans and innovative ideas from our CoP discussions. It further offers a space to work on how to negotiate, navigate and care for ourselves and other marginalised women in the academy. We used the space to build our confidence, support each other and grow in our respective research areas. Academic sisterhood is an interpretive praxis that creates brave spaces to deal with experiences of being caged in the workplace. Higher education institutions use an implicit, and sometimes explicit social contract to maintain a gendered and racial social order in the recruitment, promotion, and maintenance of the marginalisation of women. As a consequence, the corridors, offices, promotion processes, hiring committees and evaluation boardrooms are filled with caged women. Yet, despite this isolation, there is often a common thread of hope and resiliency among many women as they spread their wings and navigate their path in the academy.

Our CoP operated face-to-face as we were in the same locality and this allowed for mutual engagement over coffee and sharing stories and experiences. Face-to-face interactions also contributed to establishing lasting relationships and building trust. Our reflections from the supportive spaces that were created “by us, for us” foregrounded practices that encourage discussion, collaboration as well as discourses that support and value creativity. CoP ultimately create enabling conditions for us to exercise more agency in academia. As we reflect on our experiences, we have come to understand the value of CoP in our environment as it enables us to share experiences and learn from them; share good practices to encourage continuous learning; discuss challenges; and foster collaboration. We have also learned that working in supportive environments increases productivity; builds self-esteem and most apposite gains a sense of belonging. Cruz *et al.* (2016: 80) maintain the value of working together as it enables us to confront systems of oppression and “allows us to narrate our systemic marginality, resilience and self-empowerment while situating our experiences alongside other black women.” In the higher education environment, we often juggle heavy workloads and family responsibilities with a lack of support from the university. We drew strength from using safe spaces to nurture our personal and professional success by forming sisterhood relationships. Our experience has taught us that these spaces can offer women academics a space to talk, be themselves, be vulnerable and support and care for each other.

CoP has enabled us to carve out spaces for women to problem-solve and strategies on how to address, respond to and overcome institutional challenges, professional dilemmas and the personal struggles we encounter. We do this by supporting each other by talking about being overextended, undervalued, unappreciated; talking about professional and personal challenges; sharing views on systemic isolation, discrimination and institutional microaggressions; and discussing grant and promotion applications as well as teaching and learning plans. Working within a supportive sisterhood space has taught us how to push back and build resilience and agency. Furthermore, our lives are not limited to the academe; as a result, part of our practice should be to connect with like-minded sisters. The narratives shared by the authors in this paper re-imagine belonging in the academy and push for redress to institutionalised policies, procedures and processes that marginalise and isolate women. We urge women to activate the principles embedded in CoP by strategically positioning themselves to disseminate their work together at conferences, at meetings in private spaces and public spaces, to use multimedia technology to connect, write, and support each other. Women need to cite and disseminate each other’s scholarship; work collaboratively on research, co-author and review manuscripts; and mentor each other through discussions of survival strategies such as reframing our experiences in the university community, lecture rooms and institutional boardrooms.

Methodology

As mentioned earlier, this paper shares our lived experiences as black women academics and explores the implications of these experiences and ways in which women can become agents of change. We used autoethnography under the qualitative research paradigm to locate this study. We deemed it to be the most appropriate approach in recounting our experiences as black women academics in South African HEIs. The choice of a qualitative research paradigm was theoretically and practically driven. Autoethnography as described by Creswell (2013: 73) is a research approach for effectively narrating qualitative experiences that “contain the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual’s story”. According to Cooper and Lilyea (2022), this methodology retroactively and selectively narrates the reflections of the author’s

experiences. Autoethnography as a methodology narrates the “ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto) while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context where self-experience occurs” (Denzin 2003: 260).

Creswell and Poth (2018: 91) pointed out that ethnographers focus on “developing a complex and complete description of the culture of the group- entire culture-sharing group or a subset of the group”. Autoethnography enabled us to reflect on and write about our past experiences, and of culture and cultural experiences within our academic workspaces (Adams, *et al.*, 2017). The autoethnography approach was appropriate for our study because it was crucial to narrate the stumbling blocks we experienced in our academic journey, attaining postgraduate qualifications, postgraduate supervision and becoming emerging researchers. Ellis *et al.* (2011) assert that the autoethnography approach plays a vital role in enabling the authors to reflect on their personal lives and share their academic journey. This approach foregrounds different ways of experiencing the phenomena within the academic context. It further highlights the critical point of understanding how our experiences shaped our academic journey. Moreover, autoethnography enables reflexivity, enabling us to embed our perspectives and reflect on how these perspectives are influenced by the wider behaviours, habits and processes as an insider within higher education (Ellis *et al.*, 2011; Adams, *et al.*, 2017). We discussed how we navigated our way around the marginalisation of women and institutional microaggressions in the academy. The autoethnographic approach was therefore best suited for this paper as it allowed us to reflect on our lived experiences and how we negotiated our roles within HEIs. Through this approach, we were able to tell our stories of how we self-define and reclaim the power to strive for success in our academic journey.

Discussion

The world of academia is demanding for men and women, however women have additional pressures which include patriarchal worldviews, gender bias and sexual harassment, institutional microaggressions, and career breaks due to parenting which compromise research publication records, as well as work-family-life balance. Moreover, women are undervalued and underrepresented in academia, and this is attributable to the patriarchal practices besetting the sector. This suggests that there is a need to explore the challenges that women still face in this context to understand why women remain on the lower rungs of academia and how they can push back to challenge the status quo at HEIs.

The unremitting challenges that women experience in higher education and the low levels of institutional support necessitate the continuous exploration of how women can be supported in constructing their identity as academics. Engaging in research can contribute to opening up discussions and avenues for women academics to position themselves as scholars whose perspectives and contributions belong in academic spaces. Women academics need to collaborate on research projects, present papers together at conferences and show up for one another in the university community be it for webinars, workshops or book launches. The authors maintain that taking up research about the lives of women in academia is one way to begin to address continued classist and sexist problems encountered in the South African higher education sector. One of the findings in this research is that more investment and resources are needed for mentoring and leadership development opportunities for women in academia. Women academics need mentorship opportunities, and spaces to talk, support and be supported. Women in the academy need to continue to seek out mentorship opportunities in their institutions and the field of academia. They need to form their own CoP to engage around teaching and learning pedagogy as well as their womanhood.

The reflections in this paper signify the lack of concern for the need for caring spaces for academics, particularly for women. As a result of the historical and societal silencing of women, it is vital to centre their voices and open up opportunities for women in higher education to share their lived experiences. The act of re-collecting past experiences and reflecting on them can be cathartic and educational. The experiences of the authors in this paper highlight the value of CoP as counter spaces for women academics to be heard, reflect, provide support and be supported and develop in their respective fields. The narratives showed that CoP provided a fluid space for women academics to develop their agency and sense of belonging. Despite the increase in the number of women entering higher education, women continue to struggle with progress through the academic hierarchy (Aiston and Jung, 2015). This paper showed how discriminatory practices impact women succeeding in research and supervision. Our narratives highlighted the unequal structures and conditions that women in academia continue to encounter regardless of their experience, qualifications and abilities. The current policies and practices reflect the continued hierarchy and unequal structures that beset higher education in South Africa. Women academics need to demand

transparency. Those funding research projects in higher education need to promote women in research and women as principal investigators. In addition, editorial boards of academic journals need to monitor the appointment of editors and endeavour to ensure a gender balance with contributors.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reflected on our lived experiences within collaborative spaces created “for us, by us” in the academy. We discussed factors such as mentorship for women academics, safe, supporting work environments and sister-scholar relationships that contribute to the productivity and success of black women academics. We further discussed the coping mechanisms that women can employ to fly high in their chosen fields. Our experience of creating communities to participate in has served as a sanctum where we give and receive support. Working in a CoP cultivates a deeper, more holistic understanding of our womanhood, and fosters a sense of belonging within and beyond academia. CoP facilitates the knowledge processes, including sharing, transferring, creating, and disseminating knowledge. Due to the unrelenting challenges women face in higher education and the low level of support provided by institutions, it is essential to continue exploring how women can construct their academic identity. We believe that understanding the key constraints and identifying enabling factors may help women academics overcome difficulties in their career development and be more represented in the academic environment and society.

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