Biographic and Institutional Entanglements: Reframing Differences through a Diffraction Lens

Najma Agherdien
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2334-4581
University of the Witwatersrand,
South Africa
najma.aghardien@wits.ac.za

Roshini Pillay
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6873-1040
University of the Witwatersrand,
South Africa
roshini.pillay@wits.ac.za

Kim Schmidt
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4790-3587
University of Fort Hare,
South Africa
kschmidt@ufh.ac.za

Agrippa Mabvira
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3791-8662
University of the Witwatersrand,
South Africa
agrippamabvira@gmail.com

Uwarren September
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6844-4634
University of the Western Cape,
South Africa
useptember@uwc.ac.za

Nevashnee Perumal
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8565-2547
Nelson Mandela University,
South Africa
Nevashnee.Perumal@mandela.ac.za

Priscalia Khosa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7453-4417
University of Johannesburg,
South Africa
priscaliak@uj.ac.za

Hlologelo Malatji
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0093-0879
University of the Witwatersrand,
South Africa
hlologelo.malatji@wits.ac.za

Mbongeni Sithole
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4075-0677
University of the Western Cape,
South Africa
mmsithole@uwc.ac.za

Zibonele Zimba
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2597-2167
University of Johannesburg,
South Africa
zibonelez@uj.ac.za

Abstract

Despite the inability of the higher education sector to address colonial apartheid, relegating the associated indigenous cultures and traditions to a submissive space, the fight for a more legitimate and transformed higher education system continues. The study examines how biography and institutional context deepen how co-authors engage pragmatically in a collective project and secondly

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theorises "thinking differently about difference". Through a triadic lens of reflection, diffraction, and decoloniality, we address the research question: How can an understanding of each other's lived experiences and institutional contexts guide us towards engaging differently with one another and with differences? We employed autobiographical narrative inquiry as the most appropriate methodology. Our argument is that collaborative constructions of "self" unfolding through time and across space must centre difference as a driver of transformation in a collaborative partnership and scholarship. We offer a number of guidelines and questions for collective reflection and reflective practice that can be adapted for various social work and educational settings. The study concludes that by engaging with difference differently, and through deepened individual/contextual awareness, socially just co-authorship and cross-institutional partnerships could be nurtured.

Keywords: decoloniality; difference; diffraction; reflections; social work

Introduction: Intersections and Entanglements

Aligned with the aims of *Education as Change*, this article critically explores the intersection of personal biography and institutional contextual realities. We interrogate the assumptions and values that often go unchallenged, shaping our engagement in teaching and learning, as well as the dominant traditions within our respective institutions. Drawing on Luckett's (2024, 15) recent call to assemble "'difference' differently", we take up this challenge in our analysis. This article is especially timely given the increasingly toxic academic climate, where (epistemic) violence is becoming normalised (Vargo 2023), and people of colour continue to struggle for belonging and recognition as legitimate knowers of their lifeworlds.

We recognise that many of the intellectual challenges such as gender justice, epistemic injustices, and the marginalisation of voices faced in higher education (HE) can only be addressed through, for example, the following: multi-, inter-, and intra-disciplinary spaces, places, and discursive practices (not all necessarily). Echoing the impatience with "circular argumentations with no alternatives on offer", as Keet and Rafaely (2024, preprint) aptly put it, we engaged in collective beyond-reflection/diffraction, as conceptualised by Bozalek and Zembylas (2017). While existing literature highlights debates surrounding the value of reflection (Archer 2003; Bozalek and Zembylas 2017; Brookfield 2009), a significant void persists in understanding its implications for praxis—particularly praxis that not only accommodates difference but also draws on divergent epistemologies (how knowledge is understood), methodologies (approaches and methods), and ontologies (views of reality) as strengths rather than hindrances. This distinction is important because accommodating differences does not imply that anything goes or that all claims are equally valid. As Khan (2019, under "Beginning with the Basics") asserts, "Any word whose meaning can be altered on a whim actually becomes meaningless." Rather, we need to remain critical of privileging/silencing voices/meanings. Meaning is historically situated and politically charged, often

reflecting structures of power that privilege some voices while silencing others. We do this while still acknowledging the importance of accommodating difference. Our research question asks: How can an understanding of each other's lived experiences and institutional contexts guide us towards engaging differently with one another and with differences? We argue that a deeper understanding of context and biography has the potential to shape the way we navigate current and future collective research projects, enriching our approach with a more nuanced perspective on difference. Thus, the positioning of personal and cultural narratives matters.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework that underpinned this study, followed by a brief literature review on higher education, identity diversity, and positionality. Next, the data collection method is unpacked, leading to a presentation of our individual and collective autobiographical narratives. We outline a move from individual reflection to collective stories. While the reflection gave an account of who individuals were and highlighted individual experiences, its limitations were clear. We struggled to account for the relational, entangled, and systemic dimensions of our experiences. This prompted a shift towards a diffractive lens—one that allowed us to read across our stories, attend to patterns of difference, and trace the collective becoming that emerged through our shared, yet uneven, contexts. To do this, we added a collective story (as data point) focusing on difference, discomfort, and convergence. The Discussion section then focuses on two themes: Theme 1: Engaging differently is theoretically easy but pragmatically intricate, and Theme 2: What we now know that we did not know (or ignored) before about collective/collaborative engagements.

Triadic Theoretical Lens: Reflection, Diffraction, and Decoloniality

As early as the 1930s, Dewey (1938) argued that merely having an experience is insufficient for fostering deep, enduring learning. Instead, critical reflection on the learning process is essential (Argyris 1991; Bozalek and Zembylas 2017; Moon 2004; Perumal 2022; Van Breda and Agherdien 2012; Waghid and Davids 2014). While reflection has clear benefits, scholars such as Bourdieu (1990), Giddens (1984), and Spivak (1990) proposed a progression towards reflexive practice during the 1980s and 1990s. Reflexive practice emphasises translating the insights gained from reflection into actionable practices, alongside explicit self-positioning within the context of learning.

Building on these ideas, scholars in the 2000s, including Barad (2007) and Bozalek and Zembylas (2017), critiqued the limitations of reflection and reflexivity when used solely to critique or replicate the status quo. These aforementioned authors introduced the concept of *diffraction*, which emphasises investigating differences, disrupting dominant narratives, and engaging with complexity and entanglements (political climates, institutional realities/ontology, views of knowledge/epistemology). For Bozalek and Romano (2023), diffraction is about focusing on difference "from within" and not from a distance or outside of, as well locating ourselves as part of and not separate to. This implies that writing/researching/creating together, as we do in our project, cannot be disentangled.

Diffraction is particularly useful when transforming our understanding of diverse practices that are emergent or what Bozalek and Romano (2023) and Barad (2007) refer to as a focus on becoming rather than current being. We posit that such emergent practices can also be uncovered during reflection in/on practice and not only after the fact. If applied in ways beyond individual self-improvement—as was done in the past, often reflecting the status quo uncritically, then reflection and diffraction thus are not in opposition, but can be applied in a balanced way to both honour reflexivity and accountability (reflection), while opening up space for complexity, emergence, and alternative knowledges/practices (diffractions). Barad's (2007) diffraction is not a replacement of reflection, but offers a different kind of methodology or onto-epistemology.

Participation and engagement with each other and within our respective institutions are complex and multifaceted. Who we become in this process is in constant flux. As Barad (2007, 353) asserts:

> Believing something is true doesn't make it true. But through our advances, we participate in bringing forth the world in its specificity, including ourselves. We have to meet the universe halfway, to move toward what may come to be in ways that are accountable for our part in the world's differential becoming.

Differential becoming (in the sense that Barad [2007]) meant it, requires a collective reimagining of individual interpretations, reframing positionality, and rethinking the processes of sense-making, akin to what Barad (2007, 381) calls an ethico-onto-epistemology. These relationalities are intricately interwoven into a complex web, offering the potential to foster new and diverse understandings. Thus, a diffraction lens was deemed appropriate for this study, as it allowed us to explore how to embrace difference in ways that could transform our engagement with each other, in ways that reflection could not. Diffraction enabled deep engagement with each other's biographies, places, and spaces, thereby advancing current and future projects towards what matters to us and to the field of social work, like understanding the complexities of social issues and developing interconnectedness. Diffraction moved us beyond individual self-reflection to consider the affect, the macro and material forces at play in how we engaged.

Additionally, an intersecting decolonial lens will allow us to critique the traditional Eurocentric view of difference—to adopt a diffractive lens that embraces difference from within (Bozalek and Romano 2023)—often constructed and maintained by power differentials. This is what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) would call the decolonial turn, which offers a way for us to detach from Western ontologies and epistemologies. Decoloniality advocates for new, diverse ways of understanding the world that are not constrained by colonial legacies, and we believe it is this difference that could help us think differently about difference. In essence, through co-authorship among a group of academics, cross-institutionally and with varied levels of expertise, this in itself lends to a decolonial practice.

Viewing the decolonial turn as a process rather than an event is key. In his more recent work, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020, 384) argues for a different take on humanism or "rehumanisation", a call that characterises the recognition of the humanity of all people. This perspective positions decoloniality as a comprehensive worldview that emphasises diversity, multiplicity, and renewed humanism—an essential stance in an increasingly inhumane world. More recently, Schramm and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2024) advocated for *pluriversal* approaches that are locally rooted and globally inclusive (Schramm and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2024). By pluriversal, we refer to going beyond a single/dominant worldview, to be more inclusive of the interconnectedness or entanglement of the world.

Literature Review: Legitimately and Unapologetically Different

In examining difference as both a hindering and enabling mechanism for change, we now turn to a review of the literature on the changing HE landscape, the identities of individuals and collectives, the diversity discourse, and the way positionality is framed from a decolonial perspective.

The HE Landscape in Flux

Globally, universities face both common and unique institutional challenges (DeRosa 2023; Guzmán-Valenzuela 2023; Ramugondo 2024; Sampson 2011). From our experience and perspectives, some common challenges include the need for transformed or indigenous curricula, dismantling racism, sexism, and unjust discrimination, improving academic success rates, expanding student support, responding to various contextual changes (such as green social work), and adopting humane approaches and practices. Many higher education institutions (HEIs) have mobilised to tackle these challenges and concerns, but others have become complicit, refusing to focus on the "common good" (Guzmán-Valenzuela 2023) and instead shifting to private interests (DeRosa 2023). Belluigi and Keet (2025, xxxi) assert that it is the actual HEIs that are to blame for this dilemma, and they are thus the responsible "sites of struggle" that require a return to valuing the role of their staff in transformation.

South African HE also faces its own challenges, including an untransformed HEI sector coupled with inequitable practices (Ramugondo 2024), economic disparities, billions of rands in unpaid fees and student debt (Mkhize 2024), as well as irrelevant or Westernised curricula (Radebe and Maldonado-Torres 2024). While these challenges are shared, differences in capacity to address them remain. We contend that the reasons for these differences are contentious and, in some cases, have led to quick-fix solutions and unsustainable efforts.[1] Guzmán-Valenzuela (2023) suggests that part of what is

1 The differential ability for HEIs to respond to challenges is due to the complexity of HE, particularly after previously disadvantaged institutions (historically black universities [HBUs]) were forced to merge with historically white universities [HWUs] to speed up transformation. These newly formed institutions had no choice but to very quickly seek solutions to problems that they had inherited, for example historically marginalised "African knowledge systems", further exacerbated by the social justice and power struggles of the day (Belluigi and Keet 2025, vi).

needed is to reject the overemphasis on metrics, performance, and control (while this was found to be the case in the United states, a similar concern was expressed in the South African HE context. Sadly, universities are "providing the labour pool for the preservation of a broken world" [DeRosa 2023, 73]). In an attempt to dismantle oppressive systems and maintain critical hope on the agenda, staff and students, both collectively and individually, continue to strive for transformation.

We also contend that, without decolonisation and transformation in HE, the achievement of social justice remains intangible. Despite the Department of Education White Paper (1997) establishing transformation as a baseline and its adoption as a symbol of change during the 1991 Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Muraina, Toshe-Mlambo, and Cingo 2024), progress has been slow and limited (Njovane and Hlengwa 2024). The persistent failures in achieving meaningful transformation culminated in what Keet, Sattarzadeh, and Munene (2017, 1) describe as the "most wide-ranging expression of discontent within and with higher education post-1994 and with the South African democratic project": the #FeesMustFall uprising and violent protests. These student-led protests called for the decolonisation of universities and curricula, as well as free education.

The central argument in the call for decolonisation is that decolonial perspectives are insufficiently addressed in South African HE curricula. There is a pressing need to embrace epistemology as *pluriversal*, acknowledging that different cultures and societies have distinct ways of producing knowledge and interpreting reality (Govender and Naidoo 2023; Muraina, Toshe-Mlambo, and Cingo 2024). Key to this movement is the idea of developing knowledge systems that reflect African histories, cultures, and experiences (Radebe and Maldonado-Torres 2024) and own experiences within a HE system that has historically marginalised African knowledge systems.

Additionally, we view our focus on self-reflection as resistance to Western claims to scientific rationality that have prioritised objective, impersonal knowledge, often sidelining subjective experiences as inferior or irrelevant, to the detriment of alternative approaches and conceptions of knowledge (Govender and Naidoo 2023). Accordingly, our collective efforts challenge this by positioning personal and cultural narratives as valid and valuable sources of insight.

Individual and Collective Identity

The term "identity" originates from the Latin word *idem*, which can be translated as "sameness" (Groenewald 2024). The term is paradoxical, as it encompasses elements of both unity and diversity. This paradox is evident in how, on the one hand, the identity of individuals is distinctive and serves as a means of distinguishing themselves from others, while on the other hand, identity involves a connection with a social group (Groenewald 2024). With full cognisance of the tension between the intrapersonal and interpersonal nature of identity, we advocate for valuing relationships and interdependence over reductionist individualism. Therefore, as a team, we frame

collective identity in line with the tenets of narrative therapy as espoused by Combs and Freedman (2016). Rather than focusing on inherent strengths within individuals, this approach views identity as relational, distributed, performed, and fluid.

We are continuously shaped by the relationships and expectations surrounding us. Groenewald (2024) emphasises that the relational nature of identity is evident in how lecturers adjust their teaching styles and professional personas in response to student expectations and the institutional culture of their universities. Beyond its relational focus, narrative therapy conceptualises identity as distributed across various spaces—such as memories, cultural practices, and social interactions—that shift depending on the context (Combs and Freedman 2016). Building on this perspective, our approach to collaboration among team members from diverse institutions challenges the rigid, isolated view of individualism by exploring how educators navigate multiple identities across different environments.

Moreover, the tenets of narrative therapy resonate with the concept of an original, authentic African identity, encapsulated in the notion of "being-with" rather than the individualistic orientation characteristic of Western paradigms (Mashilo and Govender 2023). This perspective aligns with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. Ndubusi (2013) attests that the African "self" is rooted in familyhood, emphasising the collective "we" rather than the individualistic "I". However, Mashilo and Govender (2023) observe that the colonisation of education disrupted this identity, by separating educated Africans from indigenous knowledge. Therefore, the search for African identity involves reclaiming the traditional identities fragmented and eroded by colonialism.

Diversity—"Loss of Its Critical Edge"

Diversity has become tokenised and essentialised, with the uncritical inclusion of "race", gender, and perspectives becoming the norm. As a result, it has lost its critical edge (Ahmed 2019), rendering *anti-essentialism* central. Strunk and Locke (2019, 295) explain that anti-essentialism involves rejecting "essentialised social identities, recognising the unique experiences and diversity across communities carrying the same identities". Dealing with diversity in the true sense of the word, therefore, requires celebrating difference and digging beyond the surface to uncover what has become obscure or hidden. Advocating for diversity then becomes quite political, and Ahmed (2012) maintains that if such work is not valued within HEIs, then the spaces where the work occurs become devalued. We would add that, in turn, the individuals doing such work also become devalued or made to feel that they do not belong, that is, made to feel othered (Njovane and Hlengwa 2024).

Diversity further involves considering the intersectionality of difference also known as contradictions within supposed sameness, where both privilege and oppression intersect and are sustained by the political, contextual, and historical dimensions of power (Strunk and Locke 2019, 63). Not all brown bodies think the same, act the same, or have the same identity. Furthermore, we do not view diversity as solely being about "race".

Within any relationship, power differentials exist; some voices are louder and often more valued than others, and it is this difference that must be highlighted. Notwithstanding the value of undertaking diversity work, context and history render this work complex and messy, and a one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice. The individuals engaged in this work, as well as the HEIs they are part of, determine how diversity is accommodated or included within the specific terms of the institution in contextual ways (Ahmed 2019).

In a quest to maintain the "critical edge" of diversity, Nash (2018, 25) proposes that we go beyond the rhetoric of diversity, inclusion, and equality to examine the gaps between the "symbolic commitment and lived reality". Despite the tensions, addressing diversity could still present opportunities for working towards transformation (Pillay and McLellan 2010). However, in reality, universities have instead captured these moments to rebrand the institution as a marketplace (Nash 2018), which partly accounts for the slow pace of transformation (Njovane and Hlengwa 2024). Transformation efforts themselves need to go beyond the inclusion of black and brown bodies, or what Njovane and Hlengwa (2024) refer to as "representativity". This "surface-level understanding of transformation" is further described as limiting the implementation of truly transformative policies and procedures (Njovane and Hlengwa 2024, 161). This is where a decolonial lens on diversity could become useful. Thus, a decolonial lens would allow for agitation against

> the reduction of systematic and systemic inequality and dehumanization to matters of "diversity and inclusion" and to institutionally defined "transformation", as well as the strategic mistranslation of terms that originate outside of the university. (Radebe and Maldonado-Torres 2024, 283)

Positionality—A Decolonial Perspective

Critical self-reflection as social work educators enables us to improve current *ways of doing* with the purpose of enhancing student success while transforming HE (Perumal 2022). In tandem, we have the responsibility to acknowledge our privilege, power, and position as educators, juxtaposed against our own black histories, cultures, and diverse ways of knowing and being in a historically divided South Africa. This positionality leans strongly towards a decolonial and transformative social work education agenda, as we are acutely aware of our responsibility to make learning and teaching authentic, humane, and contextually relevant for African problem-solving. Our lived experiences inform our foundations of knowledge-creation, thereby attesting to the fact that knowledge is situated within our own histories, located in terms of our cultural narratives, and embodied in our sensory experiences (Haraway 1988).

Historically legislated oppression and marginalisation in South Africa still weigh heavily on our minds and bodies. Phrases such as "our blood boils", "our hearts sing", "my body is talking to me", and "my chest is heavy" are authentic expressions of embodiment that are reflected in our narrative constructions in our stories of who we

are. This positionality, made explicit to students, creates a safer learning environment underpinned by the principles of authenticity and trust (Hart 1990).

As educators, we acknowledge that we are engaged witnesses in the learning and teaching experience (Boler and Zembylas 2003) and that introspection through a critical self-reflective lens creates the potential to generate discomfort and tension within the self. It is in these moments that, working together as 10 academics, we are able to process discomfort robustly, with the aim of constructively enhancing our self-awareness. According to Le Grange (2018), complicated conversations are necessary if we are to decolonise curricula. Complicated conversations, according to Pinar (2004, 2, in Le Grange 2018, 6), "[o]ccur when we do not devise 'airtight' arguments but provide spaces for students to find their own voices so that they construct their own understanding of what it means to teach, to study, to become educated". Therefore, enhanced self-awareness invites students to speak freely and be critical of our positionality so that we can journey forward towards decoloniality and deep transformation within social work education.

Materials and Method: Autobiography

From a critical-interpretive paradigm, this qualitative study and autobiographical narrative inquiry sought to understand and critique how reflecting on our lived experiences and institutional contexts could lead us to engage differently. Methodologically, autobiography was appropriate, with its emphasis on telling and re-telling stories of life. Jayaannapurna (2017) describes such stories as constructed in a manner that unfolds through time and across spaces. The purpose is not only to foster understanding but, more importantly, as Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) assert, to drive change. In our study, this process involved collaborating differently and rethinking our approach to difference(s). A requisite shift then was to move from reflection to diffraction, and refrain from making right/wrong value judgements as posited by Bozalek and Romano (2023).

As insiders and outsiders within each other's institutions and lifeworlds, we aimed to gain a critical understanding of how the individual (autobiography) operated and positioned themselves within the institution (inter- and intra-onto-epistemological entanglements). We undertook this exploration to examine how our own positionalities—similar in certain respects yet differing in our institutional and contextual realities, theoretical orientations, and lived experiences—shaped our engagement in a collective research project. Given the focus on emergence, intersectionality, representation, and criticality made visible through a diffractive perspective, autobiography (as reported by each member) was deemed appropriate, offering an interaction of different perspectives and experiences and in turn, creating new understandings, beyond traditional reflective practices.

The methodological issues were best addressed by an autobiographical narrative inquiry, one of the biographical research methods that Cohen, Manion, and Morrison

(2007) describe as valuing subjective accounts and offering multiple perspectives on a situation (on what *could be possibilities* rather than *what is*). The choice of autobiographical narrative inquiry gained traction due to its ongoing significance for collective meaning-making and writing in the global higher education context in general (Cardinal et al. 2021) and in South Africa in particular (Collett et al. 2018; Vester, Van den Berg, and Collett 2023).

Data Collection: Autobiographies and Institutional Contexts

As part of a larger National Research Foundation (NRF)–funded project, the initial invitation to co-authors was motivated by both social work teaching—a profession steeped in social justice concerns—within South African HEIs and their scholarly focus on justice ideals. The project team included nine social work educators and one academic developer, and was later joined by a postdoctoral fellow. In a separate article, seven of the 10 authors participated in an autobiographical study, collaboratively reflecting to

> encapsulate the description of self, our reasons for teaching social work, the roles we play in the spaces that we occupy, and our solidarity in efforts to promote social justice while maintaining ethical care during our engagements with students, colleagues, friends and families. (Perumal et al. 2021, 396)

Different from the previous article, which focused on the autoethnography, in this article we reflected on our differential story lines to explore emancipatory and transformational ways of interacting with one another and within different institutional contexts. Eighteen months into the project, each participant wrote a three–four-page reflection on their biographical and institutional contexts. A sample of individual reflections is provided in the Individual Stories section. The prompts for the biographical data included:

1) Who am I? (How do I describe my teaching philosophy?)

2) Where am I now? (My academic content, teaching practicals, student profile, department profile)

3) Where do I come from? (Own educational background, previous work/experience)

4) What would I like to be known for/known as/contribute within the academic space? (Own philosophy, learning, research, community engagement)

Our Emergent Stories

From a diffractive lens, positionality matters, as do both individual and collective stories. The significance of positionality in narrated story lines may be evident in what Kayi-Aydar (2021) refers to as story lines shaping positions, while at the same time they

are shaped by them. This was true for us regarding our own identities and contexts as project co-authors. Like Ahmed (2019), we are both participants in and observers of our own lifeworlds. We hope that our stories prove valuable for educators in the humanities/social sciences generally, and more specifically, also for social work educators.

Individual Stories

The question of "who I am"—essentially an identity question—reveals the diversity within the team across various institutions. The reflections illustrate who we are and how we function within institutional contexts.

Uwarren—An advocate inspired to serve at an institution (UWC) with a history of creative struggle against oppression

> I'm the one who's willing to advocate, no matter how hard the task. To some, I am an educator, to others a facilitator and/or enabler. I wear many hats; I'm a social worker! Many fail to realise the impact of this great profession. Promoting human well-being, social work has contributed to our world's progression. Held to strong ethical standards and inspired to serve, social workers fight hard to promote the social justice everyone deserves.
>
> The University of the Western Cape has a history of creative struggle against oppression, discrimination, and disadvantage (Sampson 2011). Like other South African universities, UWC has been affected by sporadic student protests since 2015.

Roshini—Consciously caring while placing people at the centre at Wits (University of the Witwatersrand)

> Being orphaned at 15 years has changed [my] perspective in life and given me a slightly sceptical view of life. I have learnt to often keep my head down and work towards being independent and self-reliant. [I want to be] seen as a person who was able to live some of the values of social justice to the best of my ability within the personal and structural challenges I have encountered in my life.
>
> Our people are at the centre of what makes Wits great. We are collegial, open-minded, and respectful, and we are accountable and always act with integrity. We foster a welcoming environment and are committed to using our knowledge for the advancement of our community, city, country, continent, and the globe.

Zimba— A proud son of the soil, promoting imagination, conversation, and regeneration at UJ (University of Johannesburg)

> I am the son of the soil, whose identity is deeply connected to my ancestors, totem, and the village that raised me. I am Shinankura Zibonele France Zimba, the first-generation descendent of the Xokotiva clan to obtain higher education. … I am who his passion is in the love of his people, culture, and the pride of African native identity.

> The University of Johannesburg embraces and promotes the values of imagination, conversation, regeneration, and ethical foundation. The values shape social work education in a practical sense in the classroom. In our classroom, we encourage and inspire free, independent, and critical thought aimed at developing a better future through imagination.

Mbongeni—Carer, promoting African scholarship at UKZN (University of KwaZulu-Natal)

> My household name is "Kwabhekabezayo", meaning a home that looks after those who are still to come. Therefore, [I] must care for the young. … In my world, the sense of being is not about absolute existence, but is about the state of becoming. [I want to] be known as a social work educator—contribute towards socialising the young into the profession—be relevant and meaningful.
>
> [UKZN is still] addressing some of the challenges that informed the 2002 merger [and is] committed to fostering transformation through African scholarship and embracing Ubuntu principles. This is evident in its fundamental vision: "to be the premier university of African scholarship".

Nevashnee—Acutely aware of and realising chronic injustices at NMU (Nelson Mandela University)

> [I am a] third-generation South African of South Indian indenture origin [and] first-generation university graduate, with a PhD degree in Social Work. Due to sheltered upbringing, only in my adult years, I realise the chronic injustices that black people in South Africa face …[and] feel a deep need to create and join spaces for like-minded, like-hearted, and spirited academics as well as under/postgraduates.
>
> Acknowledging that higher education is unequal in many ways—students travelling from all parts of the country and Africa, not enough student accommodation resulting in an array of associated social dynamics, sharing rooms, notes, food, devices, dense course content in an unfamiliar language, and the list continues, [is important to me].

Hlolo—Pragmatic educator and advocate for student academic development at Wits

> [I am] a lecturer in the Wits Department of Social Work, teaching community work to second-, third-, and fourth-year students interested in academic development programmes for students.
>
> For some time, I have believed that the Wits social work curriculum is too theoretical and places unrealistic expectations on students for each module. While it is important to introduce students to various approaches to social work, there is a need to streamline and cluster some topics. This would help prevent students from being overwhelmed with excessive information that they have little time to process and apply in practice.

Priscalia—Social work change agent at research-intensive SU (Stellenbosch University)

> I was raised by strong independent matriarchs, who are my great-grandmother (Gavaza Makhubele) and my mother (Emily Ngobeni) in Limpopo Province. I am a second-born daughter and the surviving child to Emily Ngobeni who raised me as a single parent. … I joined academia to influence the calibre of social workers who practise in South Africa and internationally, so that they can effect positive change in people's lives.
>
> Its [SU's] mission is to be a research-intensive university, which attracts outstanding students, employs talented staff, and provides a world-class environment; a place connected to the world, while enriching and transforming local, continental, and global communities … its values are excellence, compassion, accountability, respect, and equity abbreviated as ECARE.

Kim—Authentically real at UFH (University of Fort Hare)

> I value being responsible and authentic—I prepare well for class and do my best to share content that is real, understandable, and helpful in the context of the profession and our country's context. Seeing students grow and develop in confidence and knowledge as they progress through the programme is something I enjoy being a part of.
>
> Being a part of UFH aligns [with] my belief in social justice and seeing it unfold in the classroom, where students from our local Eastern Cape communities are given an opportunity to further their education … where they are valued as people and inspired to develop into the very best social workers that they can be.

Najma—Taking social responsibility seriously at Wits

> Raised by strong matriarchs has made me determined to be self-reliant, cause no harm, and take my social responsibility seriously. … [I want to] leave a legacy of sharing and co-creating beneficial knowledge that advances societal good. … [I] want to be known for my Islamic values/principles, which state that humans are adorned with intellect and reason and as such, must question and not follow blindly.
>
> While Wits has opened its doors to 82% students of colour, what these students are given access to has not been as well published or is not that well known. On paper, Wits boasts an institutional culture that is responsive to diversity, equity, inclusion, social justice, and social transformation, yet it remains silent on the ongoing genocide/scholasticide.

Collective Stories

The focus now shifts to presenting our collective, emergent stories, recognising the importance of familyhood within the African "self" and the collective "we" (Ndubusi 2013). The lead project investigator, Roshini Pillay, reflected on meeting notes, workshop engagements, writing retreats, and ongoing discussions (artefacts available upon request). Subsequently, all co-authors were invited to contribute to or refine the collective story. Notably, we consciously shifted from reflection to diffraction, that is, "openness to the other" (Bozalek and Romano 2023, 7).

1. What makes us different?

The nine educators involved in this project are unique and diverse, based on their origins, the roles they occupy, and their motivations for teaching in HE. They all view social justice as a critical value that connects them to this project. Some of the educators are emerging professionals, while others are more experienced; this difference in experience facilitates greater sharing and co-creation. Their academic titles range from associate professor to lecturer, teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Their personal journeys in HE foster robust engagement and a plethora of narratives that place students at the centre of this process. Our families of origin and the individuals who have shaped us include parents, grandmothers, and extended communities.

2. How does this difference create discomfort for us as a group of educators?

We, as academics, inhabit a world where the emphasis is placed on publish or perish. High university rankings are prized, and management requires deep scrutiny of the number of research artefacts produced and where these artefacts are published. These high-level structural factors follow skewed Western notions of individual success.

At a group level, the discomfort that led to tensions included the unevenness and messiness of the process of working together, as collaboration requires trust-building, rapport, hard work, and active participation. We experienced misunderstandings and divergent expectations, coupled with a strong sense that there was not enough collaboration, especially during the initial and intermediate phases of the project. Project members realised that collaboration is a two-way process, is never linear, and that everyone must take action to achieve transformative agency through collective change-seeking efforts (Sannino 2022). Rich contextual understanding remained obscure, and various differences, such as ethics clearance procedures, required further contemplation.

Moreover, we needed to be cognisant of the workload of different co-authors, which included significant managerial roles such as head of department (HoD) and the relocation of members to other HEIs. These were some of the reasons why difficult conversations needed to be held to find joint solutions to this discomfort.

3. What drives us to a point of convergence?

Centring our lived experiences and positionalities in the way we teach is important, as these experiences also shape the students we teach. This type of sharing contributes to decolonising the learning and teaching process, fostering the critical integration of diverse knowledges and ensuring that colonial legacies are acknowledged and dismantled.

All of us having a strong African heritage forms a formidable team that seeks to infuse narratives about decolonial and Afrocentric ways of knowing and engaging in teaching and research. There are times when it is necessary to agitate and disrupt colonial ways of knowing by introducing alternatives to social work pedagogy. The shared goal is to

encourage students to be dynamic, progressive, responsive, and innovative. We endeavour to provide access to global academic excellence and promote the common good in a sustainable manner.

Writing as a collective and sharing about ourselves is an act of refusal to assume the role of the expert who maintains a necessary distance. These narratives represent affective encounters that communicate our individual and collective experiences. As a group, we have many years of praxis behind us, which gives us a deep understanding of real-world encounters and the contextual realities that shape our students' lives. We firmly believe in the value of learning by doing, or experiential learning, which is a significant component of authentic learning.

The halls of academia we inhabit are situated in various geographical areas, from Gqeberha to Ku Gompo (East London), KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape, and Johannesburg. All these institutions have been impacted by apartheid; some are regarded as historically advantaged, while others are seen as historically disadvantaged. Some institutions have a history of struggle against oppression, discrimination, and disadvantage (Sampson 2011), particularly the University of Fort Hare and the University of the Western Cape, where various leaders of the liberation struggle emerged. This diversity makes us acutely aware of what we bring to the table based on our origins and places of employment. The social work ethos and ethic of care ingrained in us enable us to recognise the various contextual and structural inequalities that are evident in where we work, whom we teach, and how we teach.

What brought us together during COVID-19 was the shared awareness of the significant disparities in South Africa between the rich and the poor post-democracy (Soudien, Reddy, and Woolard 2019). The shift to emergency remote online learning and teaching (EROLT) accentuated social injustice and inequity (Czerniewicz et al. 2020). This transition unfolded in a context fraught with challenges, including poor living conditions, high data costs, limited bandwidth, and psychosocial factors that disproportionately affected students from lower socio-economic groups (Motala and Menon 2020; Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2022). Unsurprisingly, many of us have since examined how learning and teaching were disrupted post-COVID-19. Furthermore, while authentic eLearning has become a dominant trend, we chose to discard the "e" and centre our focus on the essence of learning and teaching itself.

Discussion: Living the Difference Differently

In our exploration to understand each other's lived experiences and institutional contexts, we followed what Cardinal et al. (2021) regard as attending to the sociality of experience, leading to inquiry into the interactions between the personal worlds and broader social worlds. We now delve into the two emerging themes derived from our individual and collective stories.

Theme 1: Engaging Differently Is Theoretically Easy But Pragmatically Intricate

Embracing difference and recognising the multilayered nature of the self were challenging to enact but essential for moving towards the "anti-essentialism" of identity (Strunk and Locke 2019). The complexity of moving beyond the mere inclusion of black and brown bodies and social justice counterparts (a decolonial ideal) while navigating the intertwined shifts towards representativity (Njovane and Hlengwa 2024) led to significant setbacks, delaying progress on project deliverables. However, we realised that the cultural work we undertake cannot be reduced to meeting deadlines, nor could we rely on shared values as being enough. Thus, reflection on the status quo was not enough.

We now understand that no group is truly homogeneous, and our shared experiences of marginalisation or privilege, common goals, and collective identity—what Rubin (2024) refers to as surface-level positionality—are insufficient. This tension compelled us to reconsider both difference and sameness (and by implication go beyond reflection to diffraction) (see Barad 2007; Bozalek and Romano 2023; Bozalek and Zembylas 2017). The resultant discomfort was at times paralysing. Still, embracing difference meant taking "response-ability" for our collective engagement and yearning for social justice, which, in turn, prompted a diffractive process of ontological being and becoming (Barad 2007). We were compelled to celebrate differences beyond surface-level understanding (as surfaced by the individual reflections) and to engage actively with what was hidden from view.

Furthermore, a decolonial stance—as a worldview and not merely a framework—that seeks to build a new humanism that is relational and inclusive, beyond the dichotomies imposed by modernity and coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2022), helped us to navigate the tensions and contradictions within the project with greater grace and ease. This was especially true with respect to contextual difference and the situated nature of knowledge. We no longer aspired to "get everyone on the same page", which had been a significant point of contention for us, as some moved ahead at speed while others worked at a preliminary or delayed pace due to cross-institutional migration, promotions, and similar factors.

We no longer expected everyone to teach in a particular way or to embody authentic learning and course design in the same manner. Instead, we acknowledged our respective embodied sensory experiences (Haraway 1988). The classification of South African universities (traditional, technology, and comprehensive), along with their historical context (white or black) and the associated privileges or impediments, meant that we had no choice but to recognise that positionality and context shaped what we focused on, what we centred, and how we problem solved. Inevitably, we realised that our situated knowledge, rooted in our histories, cultural narratives, and embodied experiences (Haraway 1988), required a diffractive/decolonial lens.

Theme 2: What We Know Now That We Didn't Know (Ignored) Before about Collective/Collaborative Engagements

This collective project brought together a group of social work academics, each of whom values authenticity and social justice as core to their work in the classroom and their philosophy on learning and teaching. Initially, these commonalities seemed sufficient to progress from mere engagement to the substantive work needed within the project. Evidently, the diverse group was struggling to reach a point of convergence; this process was circular in nature and somewhat uncomfortable at times, prompting the group to move beyond reflection towards diffractive thinking before momentum could be gained. This resonates with Barad (2007) and Bozalek and Zembylas (2017), who assert that mirroring the status quo is not sufficient to understand difference and/or transformation. Mitranić (2022) agrees that moving beyond reflective practice towards diffractive thinking—where attention is given to the relationality of affect, physicality, contextual realities and situatedness—presents a unique and deeper opportunity to explore unforeseen and unknown possibilities.

The opportunity for collaborative engagement reminded the group that the process of engagement and planning within a project takes time to unfold. This process may be uncomfortable and complicated, stirring emotions and differences, despite members sharing similar beliefs and values and being passionately authentic. The complexity of the collaborative engagement grounded the group in a genuine respect for diversity and an appreciation for difference. It also highlighted the paradox of identity, which encompasses both distinctiveness and social connection (Groenewald 2024).

We were compelled to move beyond words and actively navigate the space between "symbolic commitment and lived reality" (Nash 2018, 25). The lived reality was that, in a collaborative project, the process of engagement and planning could not be facilitated without active participation from all members. Regardless of how uncomfortable these entanglements became, they were necessary to advance the group towards the working phase of the project so that project goals could be achieved. In this way, the project embraced decoloniality, creating room and space for people to be seen as human, for voices to be heard, for contexts to be understood, and for project goals to be redesigned in alignment with the African way of working alongside one another.

In such a collective project, it may be tempting to ignore the complexity of collaborative engagements and skip ahead for the sake of getting things done. Adopting a triadic lens of reflection, diffraction, and decoloniality within this collective project allowed for individual identity to be viewed as relational and interdependent with other co-authors, embracing wholeness. It facilitated the centring of African voices that helped to affirm culturally diverse, relational, and interdependent identities (Combs and Freedman 2016) and fostered a critical engagement with the legacy of colonialism in knowledge production. By encouraging reflexive and diffractive practices among co-authors, we explored our personal histories, privileges, and struggles and their intersection with the broader institutional context. Persevering with courage through the complexity of this

collective engagement yielded far richer individual and collective learnings (growth and knowledge production) than simply forging ahead for the sake of progress.

Proposed Guidelines: Understanding Lived Experiences, Institutional Contexts, and Difference

Group/collective project work warrants an understanding of one another's lived experiences and institutional contexts. To this end, one needs to let go of ideas of group homogeneity. Even groups that have shared/common goals and aspirations have competing (individual) priorities and comprise members who are located in varied institutional arrangements (with differential capacity to respond to challenges) and occupy diverse levels of power/agency/autonomy. Therefore, we further recommend a diffractive exploration of identity, diversity, and positionality of group members to advance collective project work.

It is necessary to critique Western claims to scientific rationality focused solely on objective/impersonal knowledge. Concomitantly, it is vital to apply structured diffractive questions to ensure continuous critical engagement with difference (from within). A set of guiding questions for individual reflection includes: Who am I? Where am I now? Where do I come from? And: What would I like to be known for/known as within the academic space? Another set of questions can apply to reflecting as a group. Recommended questions are: What makes us different and how does this difference create discomfort for us? What drives us to a point of convergence?

Thinking differently about difference diffractively demands both courage and hope, as difference continually shifts, evolves, and sometimes (dis)appears. Thus, we propose viewing difference from an Afrocentric perspective, where difference is understood as inherently relational, a source of strength, and an invitation to explore new possibilities for deeper understanding, mutual respect, and meaningful engagement. Difference is a slippery and shifty shadow. Difference is what makes us human. Truly appreciating difference is what matters even more.

Conclusion

To critically explore the intersection of personal biography and institutional context in a group project, we engaged in collective reflection/diffraction praxis. We did this to seek ways of engaging differently with one another and with differences and ultimately move our collective work forward. We believe that the deepened connection with each other and with our group praxis has been shaped positively through the context/biography/difference exploration. Reframing personal/cultural/institutional narratives as a collective of co-authors and co-investigators can deepen the co-construction of curricula and cross-institutional scholarship, though this remains a complex and constrained mission. By engaging with difference differently, and through deepened individual/contextual awareness, a generative force for socially just co-authorship and partnership is made possible.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethics Statement

Conditional ethics clearance was obtained from the Wits Non-Medical Ethics Committee (Protocol number: H23/05/27).

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