

The Social and Emotional Challenges of Female Postgraduate Students in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The study focused on the challenges to female black postgraduate students in South Africa during their period of study. The purpose was to explore the social and emotional challenges to female black postgraduate students and to come up with guidelines on assisting them in coping with their studies at postgraduate level. The qualitative design type was used and the theoretical framework that guided the study was that of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic theory. Three female black postgraduate students were purposely sampled from three universities in South Africa. Data was collected through interviews and analysis indicated that all three participants experienced serious challenges, socially and emotionally, including trauma. The power relations between supervisor and students prevented some of the participants from sharing their social challenges with their supervisors. Support was lacking from home, work and society.

INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate students either at master's or doctoral level have a certain level of desire to complete their studies, but on their journey to do so, they encounter obstacles that may hinder or retard their progress. As a black woman who has successfully obtained postgraduate qualifications, I know some of these hindrances, though there are others that I do not know of, in particular those that cause some black women to cancel their registration and drop out of universities. I was, therefore, curious to explore the lives of black females who enrolled for their studies at postgraduate level, in particular while they were fully employed, married with children, and living in communities that expected their full participation in social engagements such as funerals or weddings. My curiosity developed as some of the people I asked to explain why they were not pursuing their studies presented me with myths and misconceptions about the postgraduate experience itself. I wished to gather more on this topic, in particular the social and emotional challenges that black females experience as postgraduate students.

The guiding research question was: What are the social and emotional challenges that female black postgraduate students experience?

The National Research Foundation (NRF) has as one of its main objectives the promotion of research through funding, human resource development and improving the quality of life for all the people of South Africa. The program-

me of *Thuthuka* (a Zulu word for development) is a conceptual framework within the NRF to develop people who were marginalised, in particular black women who were never favoured by the apartheid regime (*Thuthuka Framework* 2008: 4). It is important that black women utilise these opportunities which are availed in order to develop themselves academically, yet as research by Mouton (2007: 1081) indicates, the number of students exiting higher education with doctoral degrees is still small. A report published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE January 2009:19) records that the proportion of black postgraduate enrolments increased significantly for doctoral degrees, from 47% in the year 2000 to 59% in 2005, but that the number of graduates produced by higher education is fewer than it should be, especially amongst blacks. From Education Library News (15 November 2010), a report by Academy of Science of South Africa led by Professor Jonathan Jansen has found that there are only 26 PhD graduates yearly per million compared poorly with other countries such as Portugal with 569 per million and Australia 264 per million per annum. The figures suggest that there should be underlying problems for South Africans to be so low in attaining doctoral degrees. Though there are bursaries and funding opportunities for postgraduate students there remains a low output of postgraduate degrees, especially amongst blacks. Though other researchers such as Mouton looked at funding as a major challenge for students not to complete their postgraduate studies as Van Wyk (2010) reported

in *Education Library News* (14 September 2010), the current study focused on emotional and social challenges which may be a hindrance for postgraduate students.

STUDENT CHALLENGES

Bitzer (2007: 1012) outlines a number of challenges that postgraduate students experience, such as uncomfortable events in life which may hinder the progress of studies and impact on research preparation, or student-supervisor relationships and self-efficacy. Other factors that hinder the progress of postgraduate students include interpersonal factors specific to female postgraduates (Conrad 1994; Lussier 1995; Seagram et al. 1998). Ahern and Manathunga (2004) point out that research indicates that students tend to experience a drop in motivation as their research is stalled and they do not make any progress. The delay may be caused by their constantly changing topics, lack of communication with the supervisor and general isolation (Ahern and Manathunga 2004: 238). Intellectual competence may also be one of the challenges, as was found by Parsloe (1993) from research into women who embarked on postgraduate studies in order to convince themselves that they were intellectually competent. Failure to accomplish the desired goal may compact poor self-esteem or feelings of unworthiness.

Mouton (2001: 6) outlined factors associated with non-completion of postgraduate studies such as poor planning and management, poor research skills, poor academic writing, isolation, personal problems and inadequate supervision. However, the factors outlined by Mouton (2001:6) were not gender or race-specific, so the current study explores the social and emotional challenges of black females in South Africa with postgraduate studies. Research conducted by Ahern and Manathunga (2004: 245) identified emotional and social blocks in students' lives, although it addressed only the academic side. They identified problems such as performance anxiety and personality clash that caused a delay in the completion of a PhD.

Aspects of personality can impact upon such aspects as feedback to postgraduate students, especially if the language used by the supervisor undermines or discourages them. However, negative feedback with comments that are well chosen may be erroneously viewed by students as

positive and constructive (Kumar and Stracke 2007). Kumar and Stracke (2007) point out that a supervisor-supervisee relationship can propagate a power relationship whereby the former is 'the master' and latter 'the learner'. In such a relationship, the authority may be exaggerated and rather than the postgraduate feeling empowered, he or she feels frustrated and belittled. Kaiser (1997) argued that attitudes between the supervisor and supervisee are influenced by cultural and gender factors, in that "those who have a history of being oppressed because of race, class, and or sexual orientation, come to supervision with mistrust of those in greater power" (Kaiser 1997: 57). With cultural background a challenge in supervisory relationships, some gestures may be misinterpreted. Nelson (1991) stated that men with male supervisors respected their theoretical expertise, whereas female supervisors were regarded as more nurturing and approachable. In addressing power relations in post-graduate supervision, Manathunga (2007: 207) points out that 'rather than removing issues of power effective supervision should be described as mentoring which only serves to mask the significant role played by power in supervision pedagogy.

The current study not only focuses on what is happening in the student's life as far as the academic work is concerned, but also looks at what students are experiencing during their journey of studying at a postgraduate level in a holistic way. It looks at students' life as a micro system, and its influence on their life up to a macro level. Since the focus is on black females in South Africa, the study will look for the root cause of the small number of graduates at master's and doctoral level.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework which guided this study was the ecosystemic theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner. I wanted to see the ripple effect amongst the subsystems. The female postgraduate students exist in the micro subsystem which constitute their families either married or unmarried and have children. The meso level is made up of their neighbours, and their work places. The work environment has some effects like stress which may be brought home with an indirect influence on the life of the family and studies. The macro subsystem has also the values and

belief system of the society in which these females found themselves in (Donald et al. 2007: 34-43). From the micro system, meso, exo, chrono and macro system I looked at all the factors which brought challenges in the lives of female black postgraduate students, mainly focusing on the social and emotional aspects.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for this study is a narrative approach whereby life histories of participants were narrated in relation to their postgraduate studies (Cresswell 2007: 54). I used purposive sampling in getting the participants for the study. All the participants are people that I know. I worked with two of the participants fifteen years ago and one is 45 years old and the other is 53 years old. One was my co-student at an honours level sixteen years ago and was 55 years old. It is common amongst blacks in South Africa that at postgraduate level especially at Masters and doctoral degrees that the age group is normally above 35. Most of the people study through correspondence for their junior degrees up to Doctoral degrees. The reason why people prefer part time studies is caused by lack of funding and the needs around families, since most of postgraduate students have families to take care of. Two participants had completed their Master's Degrees and one had cancelled her enrolment for Master's Degree. Ethical considerations were observed by the researcher in that all participants signed the consent forms and the interviews took place at their homes. The duration of the interviews ranged between half an hour and one hour. I allowed a natural setting whereby I assured participants confidentiality and that they should participate on voluntary basis and were free to withdraw from the study. A tape recorder was used and they all permitted me to capture data using that mode. The question that I asked the participants was "Can you outline to me the journey during your postgraduate studies, what were your joy, challenges, at home, work, and university and in your community?" The question led all participants to relate stories of their studies, because I used the word "journey" in a metaphoric way so that they could outline a detailed description of their experiences from the beginning up to the end of their studies. I used encouraging words such as "Hmmm" as they were relating their experiences. I used pseudonyms

throughout the text to protect the identity of participants.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

I used the listening guide method, which feminist researchers and cultural psychologists use in order to determine ways in which a person's voice can be overridden by the researchers and their cautions about voicing over the truth of another (Gilligan et al. 2006: 255). I used this method because I wished to listen to the voices of the participants as they relate their challenges with regard to social lives and emotional aspects of their lives. Listening closely to voices and paying attention to varying tones helped me in my analysis. An individual's voice helps researchers in determining the participants' social location, status or position (Denzin and Lincoln 2008: 66). It was easy for all three participants to identify with the researcher since the researcher was black and female; they all came from the same cultural background. They were free to express themselves and they used the language that they were comfortable with.

The following are transcripts of the interviews of the three participants:

1. Recorded Interview of Mrs. Mapula

"I was at an institution which understood an ethos of caring. I was supervised by this female white professor who was knowledgeable. The support that I received from her was amazing. You know I am single and a widow raising kids alone who were at tertiary then when I was doing my Masters degree. I am also a hard worker, I did not want to disappoint my supervisor who was so supportive. Her guidance throughout my studies was so good I don't have adjectives to describe what she did in my life. I felt that this was the person who could supervise me for my doctorate also. I managed to complete my degree in two years and this excited me. The relationship between me and Prof... was warm, and there was this bond that made me to trust her and to disclose even my frustrations to her. I had a serious problem at work where people were passing bad and negative remarks about my postgraduate studies that I was studying for my obituary. This caused a lot of pressure on me as I could not answer back. Going to work was an unpleasant thing for me but I worked

hard and never cheated on a black learner. Other than challenges at work my social life was not good I mourned for my husband for quite a long time and when I focused on my studies in my first year of my Masters degree I was attacked right in my house in the early hours at about 2am while we were studying with one co-student. My friend was shot and died on the spot and I was shot and raped through God's grace did not die. That trauma was going to be a hindrance for me to complete my studies, I was hospitalised, received counseling and I healed physically but emotionally it took time. When I went back to my supervisor the study group was there to welcome me in the research methodology class. I received flowers, cards with warm messages and that really made me cry. I realised that I was not alone, my children were at tertiary, my husband has passed away, I am staying alone in this township where criminal activity is rampant, but here is my study group from all population groups, Indians, coloureds, black and white who showed me love. That generosity act strengthened me to be diligent in my work hence as I have already said I completed my Masters degree in two years. I honour that professor, she was a mentor, mother and teacher. I will never forget her, May God bless her bountifully.

2. Recorded Interview of Ms. Letsoba

"I was a hard worker and managed to pass both BA and BEd within minimum time. I then registered for my Masters together with my friend at the same institution and we were supervised by one friendly male professor. I enjoyed studying at that institution. For me it was fun going to the institution. In the same year I encountered serious family problems. My son was doing first year at a university. He met a friend who introduced him to Satanism. He was mentally disturbed, turned to drugs and stayed at res without attending classes. He would walk on foot from the institution and come home; by the way this is a one hour drive trip. He was disturbed mentally and did not realise what he was doing. I would cry in front of him and we took him home. We found help for him but it took two years for him to recover. I stopped studying when my son got into that problem. That was a blow for my family and I did not go back to studying. I continued with my work as a

teacher and forgot about academia. Actually I blamed myself that I neglected my family at the expense of a Master's Degree."

3. Recorded Interview of Mrs. Gugu

"I experienced hardships in life, because I was married to the kind of a man who did not want me to study since he left school at higher primary. He would tear my books and chase me with a knife. ...it was tough... I stopped studying in order to have peace at home but that did not help. Our constant fights led to divorce. I had a friend who was a lecturer and she advised me to continue studying. By then I was a teacher at high school. My social life was lonely because I was now a divorcee being labelled in the township where I was staying. I decided to focus on my studies though it was part time. My supervisor was a white female doctor, hard working and knowledgeable. Our study was course work then mini research. In our class we had a diverse class. Class attendance was compulsory and there were also some practicum that we had to do. For our course we were few blacks. What was surprising my supervisor would use Afrikaans knowing very well that I did not know the language. I told her for the first time that the language is difficult for me but she insisted and I realised that in order to avoid conflict I need not confront her. She will complete her sentences with the Afrikaans word ..."hoor" meaning "do you hear". I found myself being submissive since there are few blacks who managed to get this degree. I saw that there were a lot of cultural differences and as a result we grouped ourselves as blacks and other cultural groups did likewise. I discovered that some students would praise the lecturer and that for me was difficult, I believed that it is the quality of my work that counted. I realised that she did not believe in me that I was competent because I am not talkative. I decided to work hard and ultimately I passed my degree and the exam from the council and currently I am registered in my profession. Above all I can say I grew a lot when I was doing my research and nothing can break me, even now I work very closely with my ex supervisor and she has changed her perception about me. Some of the projects we do together in townships and I see that she needs me more now."

I followed the following steps in analysing data:

Step 1: Listening for the Plot

Gilligan et al. (2006: 257) point out that in analysing one looks at the following: the territory, what is happening, when, where, with whom and why. In all three interviews I obtained a sense of what stories were being told by the interviewees. As I listened carefully, all stories focused on experiences of postgraduate studies, all three enrolled for Master's Degrees. The experiences of all three participants were different. For instance, Mapula had work-related problems and social problem –troubled by criminals. Other challenges were social problems emanating from the micro-system family, which affected their lives in other areas or subsystems, as outlined by (Donald et al. 2006: 34-43).

In interpreting the 'when' in this step, all three interviews outline the period of study. The 'where' is clearly depicted in the lives of interviewees that they talk about their work environment, their families and their supervisors' offices. All these places played a role in their postgraduate studies. 'With whom', it is clear that the bulk of all interviews are about the interviewee and their families. Other people, such as colleagues and supervisors emerge as secondary role-players in the context of stories told. The 'why' was answered in all three interviews in the form of lived experiences and social and emotional challenges of females during their postgraduate studies.

For Letsoba the social problems caused her to cancel her studies. A mother could not face a son being a drug addict and drop out of university at first year. Emotionally she was hurt and this affected her studies. Lack of communication or freedom of expression between Letsoba and her supervisor hindered her to say what her problem was. Gugu was emotionally traumatised by her husband who wanted to kill her and socially she was also labelled after divorce. Her supervisor though a female but she treated Gugu like a child due to cultural differences. Power relations are evident, with a hegemony experienced by Gugu, for an example the supervisor used the Afrikaans language repeatedly in communicating with her despite the fact that Gugu explained to her that she does not understand the language. Mapula's emotional trauma was overcome by the support she received from her supervisor and other students in her group.

Step 2: I Poems

In analysing interviews one need to select every first person "I" used by the interviewee and listen how she speaks about herself (Gilligan et al. 2006: 259). Then all these "I" phrases must be on separate lines like a poem. These I poems will appear like stanzas and reflect a change in voice or shift in meaning.

Mapula's I poem

You know I am single...
I am a hard worker...
I could not answerwhen ridiculed by colleagues
I managed to complete... in two years

Mapula's situation is quite dramatic in the sense that she believed in herself and was assertive. Her life was not so pleasant at work but she had self-control. Her hard-working spirit and inner strength kept her even when she experienced trauma. The line *I am a hard worker* was her source of strength. This identity is seen throughout her life.

Letsoba's I poem

I was a hard worker...
I enjoyed studying...
I encountered a problem...
I would cry in front...
I stopped studying...
I continued with my work as ...

Letsoba's studying experience started on a positive note, being a hard worker and enjoying studying. The painful emotions were experienced after a serious problem of her son and that brought termination to her studies. Crying reveals pain expressed in the form of tears. She showed some resilience and continued to work as a teacher, and a happy one at that.

Gugu's I poem

I experienced problems in...
I was married to this...man
I stopped studying...
I was ...divorcee and labelled...
I was so submissive...
I was competent but I am not talkative...
I am now registered as...

Gugu's marital life brought heartache and pain in her life. Her violent husband could not under-

stand her passion for studying and her studies were terminated due to constant fights, ultimately ending in divorce. The pain did not end but instead the labelling by the community members brought the feeling of unworthiness. She showed some resilience by enrolling once more, though her supervisor did not understand the cultural differences. Gugu was submissive in order to pass her degree. She was not an extrovert and that was misinterpreted by her supervisor which brought the thought that her supervisor was undermining her. Finally, the interpretation that we get in her voice of being a registered professional is the feeling of joy.

Contrapuntal Voices

Mapula's work environment was full of ridicule and she felt the pain instead used her silent voice as she continued to work hard. She never retaliated by answering back but her actions revealed a contrapuntal voice. Mapula's injury and trauma sounded as a loud voice that her studies would terminate, instead we see the opposite. She continued and in her silent voice we see determination which was the opposite of the injured body.

Letsoba has clear contrapuntal voices. She started showing assertiveness and hard work, but later on the contradicting voice. She is no longer prepared to study further and resorted to her job as a teacher.

Gugu starts with a voice depicting pain, but later in her life she uses the contrapuntal voice of victory that she is now a registered professional.

Mapula's Analysis

Mapula portrayed herself as an independent, hardworking woman. She had an amazing inner strength. Though she mourned for her husband for a long time, this experience did not discourage her in studying further. The challenge of being ridiculed by co-workers did not bring any element of despondency. She was a strong-willed person. The criminal activity which killed her friend in front of her and injured her badly did traumatise her, but she emerged as one who could overcome, due to the support system that she got from counsellors, her supervisor and classmates. Mapula is symbolically portrayed as a person who is not easily discouraged. She re-

sponds spontaneously to positive support and refuses to give up. Her silence as colleagues ridiculed her is amazing. She used a figurative way of fighting, went to class did her work perfectly and continued to study though she never got promoted. One can easily give up when there are voices which cause discouragement, but instead she knew she was employed to educate learners. Mapula's supervisor related so well with her and she knew the ethos of care. Dealing with female students and being a woman herself she had a sense of understanding their world though they did not come from the same background. The way she organised the welcome for Mapula says a lot about their relationship. Fresh flowers symbolise joy and life. They were all happy because she survived gunshots of criminals and continued with her studies. Messages on cards were portraying the positive and welcoming thoughts of love from the students and the supervisor towards Mapula.

Letsoba's Analysis

In analysing Letsoba's experiences I saw a mother who gives up easily. The meaning that I get as I study her decision to terminate her studies is that she felt guilty that she could not take care of her family, and hence the son slipped into ways that were out of order. She decided to focus on teaching and that brought satisfaction in her life. Giving up on postgraduate studies was to Letsoba a way of uttering a voice silently "*What does it help to gain qualifications and lose your child*" The symbolic meaning of tears as she looked at her son may also be interpreted as "*what have I done now to be punished like this*". Emotionally Letsoba was traumatised by what her son did and she blamed herself. The ripple effect of the ecosystemic theory is clearly depicted by what the micro system is experiencing and it now affects other subsystems like the meso level whereby studies are terminated.

Gugu's Analysis

Gugu had multiple challenges as she was studying for her Master's Degree, but she showed resilience, managing to return to her studies after divorce and re-focusing. She listened to her inner voice of becoming a registered professional. The meaning that she attached to life was closing her ears to negative voices and listening

to her positive inner-voice. She had the strength of overcoming the negative labels from society. Currently she is assisting the very society which was labelling her. Though her supervisor undermined her ability she emerged as a winner in the sense that she decided to be submissive in order to win. Presently she is helping her supervisor with ideas, which symbolises that she is successful in her career.

CONCLUSION

Support and mentoring are necessary factors at postgraduate level. Universities should put in place support structures and make students aware of such structures during orientation sessions. Unfortunately Letsoba had to quit due to absence of such structures for postgraduate students. Manathunga (2007: 207) points out that a supervisor needs to be conscious of how they relate with students and how they give guidance that it must not be interpreted as dominance even when they have good intentions. The issues of power can damage relations and affect the studies. The process of mentoring allows the freedom of expression between supervisor and the students. Researchers such as Manathunga (2007: 209), O'Leary and Mitchell (1990) and Kerka (1998) agree that mentoring should be seen as the act of providing guidance, wisdom, knowledge and psycho-social support. Psychosocial support is necessary since most students at postgraduate level are elderly people who are working, have families and are also actively involved in community issues. Some of the areas of life that they are involved in are stressful and demanding, therefore support is crucial for these students.

With regard to personal problems, one may fail or succeed. Mouton (2007) is silent about what students should do in overcoming personal problems. However, I agree with Manathunga's (2007: 218) suggestion that paternalism should be used as part of mentoring. When students are fully supported by an institution and supervisors the throughput rate at postgraduate level may increase. I conclude that the postgraduate students should be free to express what they are experiencing in life and be willing to go for counselling so that they can conclude their studies. For the females who have problems regarding their marital lives which cause emotional trauma, support is necessary from the supervisor and pro-

fessional counselling. Emotional and social support amongst students is necessary, since the challenges that they come across with on their journey of postgraduate studies are more or less similar. Supervisors should create an avenue whereby students meet and get to know one another and share their experiences. In sharing, there may be an opportunity of supporting one another. Students won't feel social isolation when support is maximized. Technological ways can also be used for chatting if problems are not so serious, like black women who are expected to play a role in their communities at funerals, cooking for crowds even when you are a postgraduate student. Black women should share how they deal with such problems, because acceptance is also an important factor in those communities. Social isolation is something that can make black women feel inferior in their communities; therefore advice should be given as to how one can balance her studies, family role and community responsibilities. In black communities there is a saying which goes this way "*motho ke motho ka batho*" meaning you are important in a community when other people value you. Social isolation brings fear amongst black women that even when they graduate their communities won't value them if they don't actively participate at weddings and funerals of their neighbours.

Work related problems where people are marginalised simply because they are pursuing studies at postgraduate level are common phenomena. Therefore, when postgraduate students talk about these issues, it won't be a painful thing to be labelled at work. Supervisors should encourage forums of postgraduate students where they hold talks or "*indabas*" and deliberate on issues that trouble them. Communication is necessary between the supervisor and the student. If a student disappears or is silent, a caring supervisor will either phone or email and inquire about the student. Communication is a two way process. Also, students should inform the supervisor about their whereabouts and challenges that they encounter. I therefore conclude by saying that financial support through bursaries and NRF funding is not enough, relationships which embrace emotional and social support from the supervisor and co-students is necessary during a period of postgraduate studies.

Regarding cultural differences, there should be an emphasis on assertiveness as black females in all areas of one's life. The black females must

learn to be positive and not undermine themselves and embrace an ethos of equality. The voices that emerged in the study showed that the participants were not assertive but submissive.

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APPENDIX

Thuthuka -a Zulu word for development

“hoor’ Afrikaans word meaning “do you hear”

“motho ke motho ka batho” Sepedi word meaning you are important in a community when other people value you.

“indabas” Zulu word meaning for a