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Entrenched: Scrutinising Academics' Race as a Social Construction Discourse

Abstract

Explicit racial incidents in South African higher education continue to highlight the need for institutional transformation. Academics are products of a South African society and education system dominated by an apartheid legacy that shaped how South Africans interacted with, and viewed, one another. This vestige of legalised inequity continues to intrude into academic spaces. This article contributes to the discourse on transformation in higher education by foregrounding academics' discourses of race. A critical examination of how academics talk about race as a social construction is paramount, given that academics are central to the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Using a social constructionist theoretical frame, the article interrogates the discourses of three South African academics; one Black, one White and one Indian, as informed by their assigned racial positionality within a South African higher education institution. Findings indicate that academics' discourse about race and racism remains bifurcated along racial lines, persisting as a salient feature of lived experience. Whereas the Black academic identified with the social construction of race in highly personal terms, the White and Indian academics externalised their discussion of race. The implications of this phenomenon for higher education transformation are discussed.

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Introduction

Apartheid South Africa's racial divisions which included Black, White, Coloured and Indian, continue to reverberate across every sector of society, including higher education. Albertus (2019) asserts that Black, Coloured and Indian members of the university community generally fear admonition from White colleagues and therefore tend

to remain silent about feeling marginalised and invisible. Jawitz (2016), in a study of four White academics, found that they were conscious of their whiteness and of their limited understanding of Black experience. Frizelle (2019) extends this picture through a critical autoethnographic account of her own positioning as a White academic amid calls for the decolonisation of higher education, arguing that complex identity politics and white fragility often produce defensive responses when whiteness is called out. These are responses that work against the project of decolonisation. When analysing the racist incident at Stellenbosch University in which a White student urinated on a Black student's laptop and books, Mbao (2022) underscores the importance of academics recognising their own implication in what happens within their institutions. The higher education context was itself central to the naturalisation and normalisation of South Africa's current race categories (Dladla, 2017), and to validating discourses and research that upheld racism (Fatyela, 2022). Despite this implication in racial incidents, White researchers occupy 50% of university posts and produce roughly two-thirds of academic research, while constituting only 8% of the South African population (Wild, 2019). Esben (2022), discussing the Stellenbosch incident, further notes that the absence of policies and protocols for addressing racist incidents in higher education remains a concern. The post-apartheid non-racialism mandate has therefore been a practical and psychological contradiction, as racist incidents continue to proliferate in higher education and beyond.

Nearly eighty years after the inception of South Africa's four racial categories under apartheid, South Africans continue to identify with and use them because they have become normalised. The White minority remains highly privileged, while the Black majority remains predominantly poor. South Africa's population exceeds 60.6 million, with 80.2% Black, 8.8% Coloured, 8.4% White and 2.5% Indian/Asian (Stats SA, 2022). Oliver and Oliver (2017) note that South Africa comprises two distinct political communities, predominantly White and predominantly Black. For millions of poor Black South Africans, the non-racialism mandate signals a need to maintain a status quo that is highly racialised, unequal and disadvantageous. Conversely, calls for abandoning race categories altogether (Erasmus, 2010) reflect the socially constructed nature of race and the ways in which it limits interaction, identity and the persistence of racial categories themselves.

This eliminativist perspective, that the politically motivated racial categories imposed under apartheid should be eradicated for racism to end, is well documented (Matthews, 2015; Vice, 2010). This is partly because of the non-legitimacy of race as a biological category and its well-documented social construction (Burton, 2007; Maré, 2014). Although South Africa's racial categories may have been imposed at the inception of apartheid, they are now normalised, and a comfortable, privileged material and lived experience accompanies whiteness, juxtaposed against the disadvantage and discontent of the Black majority. This persists because the socially constructed apartheid categories privileged whiteness at the expense of blackness, both materially and psychologically.

Kramer, Ray and Bonilla-Silva (2025) argue that the social construction of race endures because colonial racial frameworks continue to govern contemporary societies. Ash et al. (2020), Sawyer and Waite (2021) and O'Neill (2025) similarly highlight how the normalisation and standardisation of whiteness as separate and superior, universally and within higher education, systematically marginalises others. The predicated privilege and disadvantage that accompany race and racism will therefore not be removed by eradicating race categories, but by engaging with the socially constructed realities of race.

It was with this in mind that the academics in this article were interviewed, to explore their discourses about race through a social constructionist lens.

Theoretical Orientation of the Study

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism has been defined and described in myriad ways (Burr, 1997; Galbin, 2014), and this article adopts a specific orientation within that body of theory: namely, that human beings create their own realities based on their perceptions of the world. As such, human beings hold differing maps of the world, based on their history and culture, and the social processes and actions that sustain their knowledge. A central implication of this orientation is that taken-for-granted knowledge, which refers to knowledge so familiar and naturalised that it is rarely examined, should be subject to ongoing critique.

In the current South African context, the social construction of race is rooted in apartheid and colonial histories that institutionalised racial hierarchies, with the White minority positioned as superior. This was followed by Indian and then Coloured people, with those categorised as Black African at the bottom of the hierarchy. Despite the 'demise' of apartheid, these four racial categorisations persist and continue to contribute significantly to racialisation in contemporary society and higher education. The historical and cultural specificity of the three academics analysed here, and the social processes that inform their knowledge, are therefore of interest. Given the socially constructed nature of the racial categories that dominate South Africans' taken-for-granted perceptions of one another, a discursive analysis of academics' talk about race and racism was conducted through a social constructionist frame, to ascertain how the social construction of race manifests in higher education in the current era.

The study aimed to analyse academics' race and racism discourse to contribute to higher education transformation. Its objectives were to:

- examine how academics speak about race and racism;
- articulate academics' experiences of transformation as it pertains to race and racism; and
- explore what remains unspoken by academics regarding race and racism.

Methodology

Researcher Reflexivity

As a black academic doing a study analysing fellow academics meant the reality of my race, history, background and experiences would have a bearing on the study. Creswell (2014) encourages researcher reflexivity in research, which helped me to reflect on my positionality as a Black woman academic and how I have had prevalent racialised experiences in higher education. These include when some of my white and Indian colleagues thought that I was only hired as an academic to benefit from affirmative action policies not for my credentials. As a Black women researcher, I therefore had to be prepared that some of these racialised discourses would arise in my interviews with academic staff.

Research Design and Sampling

The study followed a qualitative, interpretive design, premised on a subjective relationship between researcher and researched (Kelly, 2006). It was conducted at a South African higher education institution, where sixteen academics across the delineated racial categories, Black, White, Indian and Coloured, were interviewed.[1] The methodologically complex and socially problematic nature of these socially constructed categories, and their inexorability within the South African context, is acknowledged. From the sixteen interviews, three excerpts were selected for this article because their themes were emblematic of academics' socially constructed discourses about race. The study employed non-probability, purposive sampling and is therefore not generalisable.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was done through discourse analysis, which can be done in a variety of ways and essentially involves analysing the way in which language is used (Hodges, et al. 2008) to represent and construct individuals and phenomena (Burr, 1997). The study did not follow formal conventions in linguistic discourse analysis that involves analysis of text to observe the linguistic and communicative function in the text. Instead, empirical discourse analysis which uses broad themes and functions of language in action was used (Hodges, et al. 2008). Empirical discourse analysis was used to analyse the discursive ways in which academics speak, position themselves as well as construct the world around them, with regard to race and racism in a post- apartheid higher education context, using various themes.

Ethics

Research ethics were observed and ethical clearance was obtained from my academic institution. All academics that participated in the study were informed about the aim of the study as well as its voluntary and confidential nature and that they could withdraw

1 This study derives from a doctoral study.

from the study at any point. Signed consent for the interviews and their audio-recording was obtained and during analysis and discussion, pseudonyms were used.

Key Findings

The analysis included three interviewees namely, Thabiso, William and Tasneem, who are academic staff members at a South African university. Key findings from the participants will be presented in the ensuing discussion organised around three central themes, arising from empirical discourse analysis. These included 1) academics' nuanced naming of race as a social construction; 2) a climate that necessitates the discussion of race; and 3) academic and impersonal discussion of race

An Introduction to Thabiso, William and Tasneem

Thabiso is a black male in his late 40s and an academic for 18 years. He commenced his academic career during Apartheid. He started his career when students and staff were predominantly white and was now engaged with students and staff in his department who are predominantly black. His account of his experiences of race and racism throughout the interview was very vivid and was illustrated with examples. At times the pain in his accounts was palpable. He constructed the subject of race and racism as very realistic and indisputable and positioned himself as a casualty of the social construction of race and ongoing racialisation. Cranston and Bennett (2024) argue that black and racially marginalised staff and students in higher education continue to be casualties of systemic racism which supports Thabiso's positioning.

William is a white male in his 40s and an academic for 15 years. In the interview he constructed himself as a privileged white male who felt compelled to talk about race even though talking about race reifies it. He presented himself as cognisant of the dynamics of the socially constructed nature of race especially as it relates to crime. He provided a highly distanced account of race and how it related to him and positioned himself as questioning taken for granted knowledge about race and whiteness. Throughout the interview he referred to race in work and in academic terms and never related this to private spheres of his life.

Whereas Thabiso and William are peers in their late 40s who had been in academia for closer to two decades, Tasneem was a younger new academic in her early 30s who had been in academia for 5 years. She had joined academia in a post-apartheid higher education context with the rhetoric of South Africa as a rainbow nation where racial redress and opportunities for academics like herself would be abundant. In fact, she would have been aware that she was part of a new generation of Indian academics in a historically white higher education institution. The general focus of her racialised understanding was as a concerned staff member for herself as a young developing academic and for her colleagues.

Academics' Nuanced Race as a Social Construction Discourse

I asked each academic to share their understanding of race. Thabiso responded:

> Race is a social construct and a lot of people are confusing themselves saying race does not exist. Race exists as a social construct. So you hear people say 'oh well people share about 99.9% genetic variants, so we are all the same'. **We are not interested in race as a biological construct, race is a social construct**, it has got a long history, so race exists as a social construct and it will continue to influence the way other people see us. It has got dire consequences, your race has got dire consequences, especially if you are not aware of it or you maintain a colour-blind attitude towards it, willy nilly, it will affect you even without your awareness. So this is a social construct, it is there, it will always be there…

Thabiso first paused before answering, indicating his hesitation and discomfort with the question. He then indicated that others position race as not existing, while they confuse themselves, as he emphasised that "Race exists as a social construct." Asked the same question on his understanding of race, William acknowledged that this was a huge question, in other words that there were many dimensions to this question and then gave an academic or intellectualised response, explaining that race is a social rather than a biological construct. Unlike Thabiso however William did not reiterate the existence of race, albeit, as a social construct.

He stated:

> That is a huge question, I mean, I suppose I have the fairly conventional Social Sciences interpretation that race is a social, rather than a biological category, and that in South Africa there were specific racial categories that were fundamental to colonialism and then more officially to the sort of bureaucracy of apartheid and that those have categorised people into very clear distinct social groups and even with the peak line of apartheid those historical categorisations that people still have a profound effect on people's social and economic lives. So in that sense, I mean, I think that race is a very complex notion in that its essentially about biological markers like skin colour and things like that but in fact it's about social categorisation of people which have very specific historical.. and I mean one can go on at length about South Africa, but these kind of historical roots…

William mentioned that South Africa's racial categories were fundamental to colonialism and apartheid. The privilege and advantage that both colonialism and apartheid afforded white South Africans, including William, while simultaneously decimating black South Africans is well known and no doubt, a fact that William was aware of, however he did not

even allude to it in more specific terms. This silence on the social construct of whiteness and its consequences, supports the notion of the normalised, invisible and standardised position of whiteness (Steyn, 2001; Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Green et al., 2007; Vice, 2010; Di Angelo, 2012; Scott, 2012). In contrast Thabiso's response, positioned Thabiso as possessing clarity about the existence of race and the harm thereof. Bravemen, et al. (2022) as well as Salter, et al. (2018) argue that racism is systemic and is often invisible to those who are not casualties of it, which Thabiso alludes to as applicable to those who deny the existence of racism.

This highlights how those that do not experience racism, often dismiss it as non-existent or exaggerated or confuse themselves about it as described by Thabiso. Thabiso demonstrated his understanding of the argument against the existence of race as an entity when he says "oh well we share 99.9% genetic variants so we are all the same", a discursive move that prevented any potential challenge by implying his thoughts on the genetics of race. The distinctive dichotomous usage of the terms "we" and "us" can be interpreted to refer to other black people because Thabiso is black. It is also significant that Thabiso included himself when talking about 'we' which personalised the experience of the social construction of race for him. In other words, he reinforced the notion that for black people, himself included, the existence of race as a social construct is very tangible, real and personal. Hlatshwayo's (2020) assertion that marginality, alienation and epistemic violence is faced by black academics and students in South African higher education supports Thabiso's assertion. The use of the expression "oh well" to describe how others speak about race scientifically, rhetorically signifies resignation and a nonchalant attitude that weakens the scientific argument against race. Additionally, to emphasise his point further, he reiterated that "we are not interested in race as a biological construct, race is a social construct". It is significant that he used the word "we" to emphasize his position on the existence of the social construct of race, implying once again that there were others who agree with his understanding of a binary opposite position, while also creating a shared identity with me as a black academic interviewer.

In contrast, William spoke about race in an externalised manner. He referred to the Apartheid bureaucracy that categorised people into distinct social groups and the profound social and economic effects that this had on people's lives. Notably, he did not include or implicate himself in his descriptions as Thabiso did. Furthermore, he did not elaborate on these profound social and economic effects either for himself or others. He described the experience of these profound effects in a distanced manner as being about others and not himself. William once again alluded to the very layered and not so simple subject matter of race, where he referred to race as very complex, about biological markers such as skin colour and specific histories and roots. However, he never alluded to the personal despite being personally implicated as a white South African man.

Conversely, the position of colour-blindness that suggests that the social construction of race, 'does not matter', is contrasted by the Thabiso's position for whom the concept of colour-blindness is ludicrous, because of its dire consequences. Durrheim, Mtose & Brown (2011) attest to this colour-blind framing of race by highlighting white peoples' use of arguments such as, "it's all in the past", minimises continuing contemporary discrimination its impact. Similarly, Sithole (2016, p.51) argues that, "…there is a concerted effort to nullify race and racism in the anti-black world through euphemisms like non-racialism, humanism, race transcendence, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, colour-blindness and so on". The conviction with which race is discussed by Thabiso where he repeats five times that 'race is a social construct', demonstrated that race exists as a social construct for Thabiso as he positioned himself as being directly influenced by race and its long history in the way "people see us". The use of the word "people" is non-specific. It can therefore be interpreted to refer to all people, irrespective of racial specification and the listener can decide which people Thabiso refers to. This alludes to the power of the social construction of race which affects the ways in which "people" perceive one another.

To solidify his position, Thabiso twice problematised the issue of seeing race as non-existent as having "dire consequences". The dire consequences Thabiso alludes to bring attention to the racial trauma and violence that permeates higher education that affects the well-being and health of black people, especially (Balfour et al., 2023). To further emphasise his argument, he problematised the idea of a 'colour-blind attitude toward race'. By using the word "dire", Thabiso did the work of positioning the view of race as non-existent as problematic. The idea of subterfuge seems to have been inferred by Thabiso, where he argued that if people are encouraged to focus on the non-existence of race, they will be blinded to the extreme consequences that result from not seeing race. He stated that "…willy nilly, it will affect you without your awareness". Metaphorically this creates an image of an insidious spirit which latches itself onto one's psyche consciously or subconsciously and influences people's existence whether they like it or not. Thabiso specifies again that race is a social construct highlighting that "…it is there, it will always be there", once again constructing its perpetuating existence and pervasiveness.

Thabiso therefore positioned himself and others he considers to be like him as objectified by the powerful 'social construction of race'. He suggested as self-evident that race is not controversial when discussed as a social construction and that the constant dispute regarding the non-existence of race was irrelevant because 'race as a social construction' does exist. In this respect Distiller and Steyn (2004, p.7, cited by Jawitz, 2016, p.950) posits: "to insist on the constructed nature of 'race' is to make it impossible to talk about the material reality generated by the concept". Hence Thabiso's insistent positioning of the social construction of race is notable as well as his silence about the

debilitating nature of racism, which he simply described as dire. As a black interviewer he had possibly taken for granted that I understood exactly what he meant by dire and appreciated the freedom to express himself without much specific detail to an interviewer who understood.

There is some overlap in Tasneem's race as social construction theme and the following theme; a climate that makes discussion of race a necessity.

A Climate That Makes Discussion of Race a Necessity

As a newer academic, Tasneem similarly conveyed the persistence of race as a construct and the continued need to address it within South African higher education:

> I think that in today's climate in certain instances that it is –you have to, there is lot of emphasis on race; whether you going to join the employment arena or uh when it comes to any issues that might crop up a bit affect your rights uh-m yah so race is important in those respects (…) Unfortunately it's a reality. And even though you don't want to talk about it, it crops up; its ugly head rears you know uh-m…

Tasneem referred to the current racial climate in South Africa as a critical element that influenced how universities work. Milazzo (2017) describes South Africa as having a climate that is still dominated by white privilege, institutional racism, exploitation and unemployment which predominantly affects black people, post-apartheid. Similarly to William, Tasneem asserted that in today's climate we must talk about race, which positioned her as compelled to talk about race while not necessarily wanting to. She further mentioned the emphasis on race and employment, which alludes to current policies of affirmative action concerned with redistributive justice in terms of racial categorisation. These policies provoke controversy as Black people are perceived to be advantaged over white people (Durrheim, et al. 2007). She also referred to race as "cropping up" when talking about any issues, which metaphorically constructs race as suddenly appearing unexpectedly, affecting her rights which are personal and political. The "cropping up" of race also suggests that it is made relevant by others who raise it. Tasneem therefore referenced the importance of race as affecting the personal and political and that it was deliberately tropicalised. Similarly to William, Tasneem did not speak about the social construction of race from a personal perspective, as was the case with Thabiso. She spoke about it in a distanced way and referred to it legally in terms of how it affected employment. She did not refer to how it has affected her employment personally.

She viewed discussions of the social construction of race as regrettable and negative, but a very real part of current realities. By stating twice that it, (race), 'crops up' even when 'you don't want to talk about it' once again creates the idea of being forced to deal with

race against her will. Referring to leadership in higher education Sawyer and Waite (2021) contend that perceived racial discrimination creates division in the academy that is often normalised. This supports Tasneem's sentiments. To reinforce her point Tasneem points out that "…its ugly head rears you know uh…" when referring to race, and by using the 'rearing its ugly head' idiom, constructs race as undesirable and unpleasant. The use of "you know", inviting me to agree with her, also suggests that in South Africa it is taken for granted that race will crop up and not necessarily in a positive way. Probed further about her reference to its "ugly head", Tasneem answered the question after slight hedging, and returned to the issue of employment.

Tasneem further expounded on how race continued to "crop up" in workplace decisions including hiring, as she lamented:

I think that in certain instances I mean if you're looking at the you know, let's just take the employment for example right; so you're looking for a job I mean and now at this university we had a meeting a few weeks ago and they were enquiring if we had any colleagues that were looking for a job to join the institution here, I mean they are looking for a job here. And we were like we had like XYZ people that we could bring forward but unfortunately we were told, but they have to be of a certain race group; black –black – black South African. And if you didn't fall into that category and even though there was this scarcity and there was a need for lecturers uh-m unfortunately our colleagues wouldn't or people that we knew that we could refer they wouldn't obviously be you know, looked at.

She said that her colleagues were looking for a job at the university and referred to her colleagues as "X, Y, Z" and did not detail specifics of who they were, and yet curiously explained that they "unfortunately" had to be "black, black, black South African". Repeating 'black' 3 times could have indicated unease with revealing this detail which led to slight stuttering on her part. By default, it was apparent that her colleagues were not black South African which she explained as unfortunate because of the scarcity of lecturers which meant that they wouldn't be looked at. By her statement about non-black lecturers not being looked at despite scarcity of lecturers and adding 'you know' as a rhetorical question, seems to signify hesitation and embarrassment at having to state this selection practice. Tasneem was troubled by her colleagues' inability to obtain employment because they were not black where she stated that this was unfortunate, an indictment on affirmative action. As an Indian academic however, Tasneem herself was a beneficiary of affirmative action. However, she seemed to exhibit the ambivalence and duality concerning affirmative action referred to by Durrheim et al. (2007) by being in a racial juxtaposition where she experienced the benefits of affirmative action as well as its drawbacks. Tasneem, nevertheless did not speak about this positive personal factor about her race at any point in the interview, further distancing race issues as personal for her.

Tasneem explained race as negative and unfortunate. Her talk was troubled and uneasy, where she felt compelled to talk about race against her will while constructing the social construction of race negatively. She spoke about race in a relatively distanced manner focusing on employment in reference to others and not in a personal sense as discussed by Thabiso. Despite alluding to the way in which race affects the personal and political, she did not reference it positively in terms of herself. Her current employment in a previously, historically white university, through affirmative action, was not factored into her talk. However she spoke about the regrettable situation of her colleagues who could not obtain employment because they were not black. This suggests that she did not identify with blackness as defined in the South African constitution which includes Indian, coloured and black South Africans. Conversely, it could also be that the institutional employment policy does not subscribe to the constitution's definition of blackness. The specific university where I did the interviews, mandates the requirement to employ black African academics over Indian academics. Ruggunan (2010, p.12) explains the position adopted by this university as follows "…non-legislated policy prescriptions from the National Department of Education also mandates higher education institutions…to undertake classification on the basis of race..." Moreover schools, units and departments further develop specific equity plans keeping the legislated policies in mind (Ruggunan, 2010).

Intellectualised Discussion of Race as a Social Construction

Asked whether it is important to talk about race, William responded:

> Yes I think it is, but I think it's important but it's dangerous because when you start talking (.) I mean, for instance (.) I mean, it's always better to be more specific. I work a lot on the problem of violence in South Africa, and when people think about violence, they think about race. This is always already happening, there's already race built into the assumptions about violence. For example, I don't know if you saw this Red October thing last week? It was a big protest that was organised in Pretoria by these white people who were protesting against what they believe is a black genocide against white people in the form of violent crime (.) well, if you are interested in race, go back and look at that (.) just look for it on Facebook, and it was hugely controversial but it's this Afrikaans musician, what's his name, Steve Hofmeyer, and he makes these statements all the time (.) but he, anyway(.) I mean, it's an interesting example because here you've got people who self-identify as white, they are very strongly identify as being a white community, and they see themselves as a community under siege, and they see themselves as a white community under siege by black South Africans in general and black criminals in particular….

William agreed that it was important to talk about race but immediately stated that it was dangerous and paused before stating the reason for this danger. To explain

the danger of speaking about race, he specifically related it to the work that he did on violence and said that, when others think about violence they think about race. Pausing and relating race to others and his work was a way of distancing himself from race and implied that he was not like others, namely other whites. This supports the notion of white people as individuals (Falkof, 2015), and William positioned himself as such. He positions himself as a white academic who is not like other whites. After explaining the prevalence of raced thinking and assumptions about violent crime he provided an impersonal example, namely, the 'Red October protest in Pretoria by whites about black genocide against white people' to illustrate his point. Once again, the distancing from the subject of race becomes evident, and framed as "these other white people" concerned about black people and violent crime. He insisted twice that if I am interested in race I had to go and look for the protest on Facebook. This again is a strategy that deflected attention from himself personally by discussing race generally, thus separating him from those other white racists. This is starkly different to Thabiso who constructed race as a personal reality.

He further mentioned that the Afrikaans musician, Steve Hofmeyer, was involved in the protest and that the protestors very strongly self-identified as white which he states twice. It is striking that he mentioned Steve Hofmeyer's Afrikaans ethnicity, from which the Apartheid ideology was birthed, and that he externalised white people and their actions as not being part of who he is by referring to them as "they", further distancing himself. William specified twice that these white protestors saw themselves as being under siege (a strong military metaphor suggesting pressure from attack) from "black South Africans in general and black criminals in particular", which he referred to as 'a very extreme example of white race thinking' which he stated was also normalised when violence and crime are discussed.

While separating himself from this extreme thinking, William implied that these white people were outliers or deviant elements who were the exceptions, revealed by his reference to them as "very extreme". He drew on the racist Afrikaner discourse argued by Durrheim et al. (2011, p.95) to be "…built around such prototypically vivid images of people like Eugene Terreblanche, the right-wing political leader" also viewed as very extreme.

William continued:

> …and so this is quite interesting, and obviously it's a very extreme example of the kind of white race thinking about race, but in fact it's also a very normal way of thinking about the problems of violence and crime. When people think about violence and crime, they think about black men, and this seems to be across social groupings, different socio-, economic-, race-, ethnic groups all seem to have this idea that this big South African threat of crime is actually, in some

> deep sense is a threat of criminal black men and very few people think about violence and criminality in terms of whiteness… apart from Julius Malema, I mean that is quite interesting, he's publicly said that white people are criminals and we must actually punish them for that. That is the kind of interesting inversion of discourse….

William specified that the thinking that black men are the perpetrators of crime and violence and not white men was 'very normal' thinking, 'across social groupings and different socio-economic, race and ethnic groups', constructing a perceptual metaphor of the naturalisation of race thinking. He also spoke academically about the binary of black versus white by the way in which he constructed "them". This strategy further distances him from the issue of race as an individual and constructs race as a collective South African problem. Even when speaking about the exception of Julius Malema whom he said stated that white people are criminals that should be punished, he still referred to white people as "them" and did not include himself. Moreover, he distanced himself more from the subject of race by speaking academically about Julius Malema's isolated response which he declares was an "interesting inversion of discourse". Interestingly there were protests that were labelled apartheid, by white, right-wing supremacist South Africans (#Black Monday) against the killing of white farmers by black people. Both Steve Hofmeyer and Julius Malema spoke in binary opposition to one another; with Steve Hofmeyer lamenting the excessively high number of farm murders and Julius Malema vowing that a counter protest would be organised next time (Khaas, 2017; Manyathela, 2017). William's academic language, as well as his positive representation of himself, by not identifying himself with the two polar extremes in South Africans politics was therefore apt. William was also by default representing himself as not racist by not identifying himself with the white identified people he describes.

William further explained:

> …(B)ut okay, for me to talk about crime and violence, which is what I talk about, I've got to look at the racial construction of these things, I've got to look at how these fears that are fundamental to South African social life become racially inscribed, and why it is that people for instance fear being mugged, but they don't fear being defrauded by their insurance company, or something like that, and when you start looking at those things you actually see, well underneath those things, is race. I mean blue collar crime versus white collar crime, which is kind of black crime versus white crime also (.) so these are interesting things….

William insisted that his occupation required him to consider race when he stated "I've got to", twice. This implies that he is forced and has no choice in having to talk about the social

construction of race, and how fears become racially inscribed in his work, which he confined to an academic perspective. His description of fear becoming racially inscribed locates fear of crime and violence in racial constructions, and he explained his job as an interrogation of the process by which fears become raced. He also then equated mugging with defrauding by insurance companies, which may have been a questionable move by a liberal white scholar. There is an obvious reason for people to fear mugging over any kind of fraud (raced or not). This includes direct physical violence which is scary on multiple levels while indirect financial violence may cause anxiety and anger. He justified this by stating: "when you start looking at those things you actually see, well underneath those things, is race". By asserting this, he positioned himself as questioning taken-for-granted knowledge around crime and race, having asked questions about the status quo. This was supported by him saying that "when you start looking", which implies that most people don't look "underneath those things" as he does, "what you actually see is race". The use of "actually" specifies that this was a specialised perspective that others don't necessarily have access to, also a truth claim, namely that it's not *really* about violence, it's *really* about race. He remarked that blue collar crime versus white collar crime was black crime versus white crime which, in his view, was interesting. Once again William distances and detaches himself personally from the discussion by directing and centring race on his work and conversing about it academically.

He consistently used "I" throughout mentioning twice that he "needed to talk" about race which implied that there was a reluctance to discuss it and that he didn't want to discuss his work and conflate it into race. However, he said that it was complicated and asked how it was possible to discuss his work and prevalence of violence in one group more than another without focusing on race. He consequently explained that he needed to talk about problematising "racing" fear and risk while being careful to not attribute criminal status to groups in which crime prevalence is high. He suggested that discussions of race are fraught and problematic and he had to talk about race but he also couldn't "talk about why that is without collapsing it into race". He says:

> So on the one hand I need to talk about racialisation in terms of these fears and constructions of risk that are racialised, on the other hand I need to talk about certain things, like why in certain social groups there are higher prevalences of certain kinds of violence than others, and to talk about why that is without collapsing it into race. For instance, economically disadvantaged groups tend to have more social violence, globally, it doesn't really matter what the racial organisation of the society is. I need to be able to talk about that, and um (.) so it becomes (.) to do my work, I have to talk about race, but the question is to talk about race without reifying race into causal categories which is (.).

William deliberated further on the same theme where he spoke about economically disadvantaged groups tending to have more social violence globally regardless of race

and yet there is a link to race. He consequently concluded that he needed to talk about race to do his work. Additionally, he reiterated: "but the question is to talk about race without reifying race into causal categories". The fact that William hesitated and paused illustrated that he was struggling with the topic of race and it was uncomfortable but he "needed to" and "had to" talk about race although he didn't want to, because race had to be topicalised but not reified.

Overall William tried to provide a distanced and detached account of race and how this related to him. He consistently spoke in language associated with his profession rather than his personal life. The issue of the private versus the public when discussing race, seemed to be a constant internal debate for William, often silenced and shrouded by his duplicitous messages of refusing to relate his talk to himself as a white South African man, while implicating others. Earlier in the extract, William equated mugging with defrauding by insurance companies attributing the fear associated with muggings to raced constructions of crime and the criminal. Afterwards he positioned himself as questioning what he constructed as taken-for-granted knowledge around crime and race but in doing so appeared to implicate others (other whites) as accepting of this knowledge. His reiteration of "actually" indicates that this specialised point of view was also a truth claim – saying it's not *really* about violence, it's *really* about race. Using academic discourse, he also positioned himself as a specialist that had access to special knowledge that other whites didn't.

His distanced account about the importance of race shown by his referencing of the subject in terms of professional life and his discussion of it in academic terms, indicated that William was uncomfortable discussing race as a social construction. Another indication that race is uncomfortable for William, are the multiple occasions when he shifted between positioning himself as having to talk about race and having to not talk about race in particular ways. This exhibited that William had difficulties with the social construction of race even at this dissociated academic level. The manner in which he positions the social construction of race was thought-provoking, as he constantly referenced it as something that he "needed" to address, implying that it is not something that he necessarily *wanted* to address. He used sophisticated academic language as a defence to avoid addressing the relationship between the private and the professional which he was implicated in, where he vocalised his need to talk about this public and professional issue of race. In short, William was, discursively speaking, in trouble. He needed to talk about race but at the same time his attempts to do so were troubled and tense. He was caught in the inextricable position of what May (2015, p.23) refers to as being "…socially located in multiple and overlapping ways", where he cannot separate his personal and professional self.

Towards the end of the extract, William's discomfort and awkwardness became more apparent in his pausing and hedging. He once again needed time to formulate an answer

which involves the difficult juxtaposition between having to talk about race and having to not talk about it in particular ways that are 'taboo'. As a white South African and an academic, this means that he likely identified as liberal and non-racist and has solemn concerns over being perceived as or being accused of being racist, particularly when engaging with a black interviewer. This likely accounts for some of his discomfort. The South African context includes the production of white domination politically, socially, historically and culturally and its pervasiveness in relationships as described by DiAngelo (2012), which William is cognisant of. This would explain his actions of positively self-representing as non-racist.

What pervaded William's talk about the social construction of race overall was his uneasiness which he disguised by speaking about it expertly and professionally and within an academic space. By distancing himself from it by problematizing it as plaguing other whites, William seemed to exhibit a form of denial of his personal stake in the 'white collective unconscious' (Hassim, 2016), that is part of current South African society where an identity that is racist is no longer valued (Augoustinos & Every, 2010). He actioned his denial by focusing on the binary opposites of the extreme right with Steve Hofmeyer and the extreme left with Julius Malema when speaking about race, therefore positively self-representing. As an academic the issue of the private versus the public was a constant internal debate for him, often silenced and shrouded by duplicitous messages where on the one hand he expressed the need to analyse race and yet on the other he worried about reifying race if he analysed it.

Discussion

The study's aim to analyse academics' race and racism discourse was accomplished using a social constructionist lens that acknowledged the socially constructed nature of race. The academics interviewed were aware of the socially constructed nature of race but this did not negate the profitability of these categories for black, white, coloured and white South Africans in varied ways. Stevens (2016) points out that despite there being debates regarding human experience that is explained as being socially constructed, rather than empiricist, old conundrums and ways of seeing the world continue, in a more nuanced way. Despite the scientifically well documented research detailing that race does not exist as an essence, the notion of race as an 'essence' continues to be difficult to abandon, globally, also for academics. This was demonstrated in the study where the status quo concerning the use of the apartheid racial categories was advanced in a nuanced way by academics. The 'old and ongoing conundrums' alluded to by Stevens (2016, p.1) within the higher education context include a dominating Eurocentric curriculum and an infrastructure through which blackness is victimised (Sithole, 2016; Heleta, 2016) which Thabiso echoes in his discourse on race as a social construction. The awareness of the socially constructed nature of race does not in any way negate its meaning for Thabiso, William and Tasneem.

The responses of Thabiso, William and Tasneem suggested a sense of an existential comfort and discomfort when confronted with the question of the value of the concept of race, particularly because of the pervasive socially constructed racial labels in South Africa. The manifestation of this discomfort when talking about race however manifested differently for Thabiso, William and Tasneem. For Thabiso personal and tangible experience pervades his discourse whereas William and Tasneem have a more impersonal and distanced race discourse. Of interest is the nuanced 'race as a social construction discourse' of academics. The social construction of race is itself constructed and discussion of race as a social construction focuses on a nuanced way of talking about race through a discourse of race as a social construction.

It was significant that the predominant race as a social construction discourse that dominated the paper was William's. This can appear to invisibilise and subordinate Thabiso and Tasneem's voices. This supports the notion of the normalisation of the white voice and the assertion by Albertus (2019) that black, coloured and Indian members of the university community are often silent in their marginalisation and invisibility. Upon reflection and examination of my data it was also clear to me that William was most vocal specifically because his race discourse was abstract and not personal. Thabiso, especially, in comparison, spoke very personally about race as a social construction and implicated himself in it but did not expand. The metaphors he used however painted a picture of the insidious and harmful effect race has on one's being. Tasneem was also less focused on herself when speaking about race as a social construction but also alluded to the ugliness of race where her colleagues are concerned. It is therefore apparent that the social construction of race discourse of Thabiso, William and Tasneem solved the problem of talking about race as a reality and an unreality bifurcated along racial lines. Thabiso spoke about race as a 'real' construction manifested in South African reality. William and Tasneem on the other hand stated that despite its socially constructed and non-inherent nature, there was a compulsion to talk about race but were less focused on discussing it on a personal level. What was clear is that there was a need to talk about race for William, Thabiso and Tasneem. Moreover, South Africans of different racial groups experiences of race as a social construction are different and need to be heard and acknowledged for transformation in higher education to occur.

Implications and Significance of Findings

Cranston and Bennett (2024) argue that the deeply rooted norms of Eurocentric white normativity in higher education allows racism to thrive without interference because of its institutionalised, systemic nature. In the South African context, the scrutinising of academics' race as a social construction discourse revealed the entrenchment of these norms. The significance of the study findings is the fact that the understanding of the socially constructed nature of race by academics, does not negate its effects in the current context. In the transformation imperative within higher education there is not

enough focus on the contentious subject of racism and academics' experiences. Kramer, Ray and Bonilla-Silva (2025) allude to this gap in the context of the United States by arguing that the racism and education debate fails to accurately study the role of racism in society. Furthermore Wilson (2025: 375) point out that "…scholars tend to neglect processes that may contribute to racial inequality, through indirect, inconspicuous and unintentional means…" The victimisation of blackness wherein Thabiso described the very personal and tangible, insidiousness that accompanies blackness in academia is a case in point. The implications of these findings suggest the need to confront the 'indirect, inconspicuous and unintentional effects' of racism that are a reality for many within South African higher education. In support Cranston and Bennett (2024, pg. 120) further point out that, "…if we put our minds to work on examining the evidence of how systemic racism is structured, reified and experienced in higher education, we have a better chance at seeing it for what it is and therefore dismantling it".

Despite the more impersonal and distanced race discourse from William and Tasneem they also expressed the 'ugliness of race'. William focused on the extremes in terms of black and white race issues in South Africa and Tasneem on non-employment of her colleagues because of their race. Both William and Tasneem's more impersonal expression of having the compulsion to talk about race also has the implications of highlighting the fact that no matter the race, the social construction of race affects all in very specific, tangible, nuanced and subtle ways. Warren and Valentino (2025, pg 409) state that "It is important for researchers to investigate whether and how inaction, silencing, and absence also factor into individuals' – and institutions' definition of racism". Higher education institutions therefore have the responsibility to actively engage at a deeper, more reflective and solution focused level, in the interests of effective transformation.

Conclusion

Three decades since the demise of apartheid, South Africans continue to use the racial categories of black, white, coloured and Indian to identify and speak about themselves and this extends to academics. Despite academics' understanding of the socially constructed nature of race, its normalisation and entrenchment for them was apparent in their discourse. Their discussion of race and racism was bifurcated along racial lines, particularly in terms of the way they experienced race and racism. Whereas the experience of race as a social construction and its resulting consequences was personally detrimental for Thabiso, more distanced abstract experiences were discussed by William and Tasneem. This suggests that the nuanced discussion of race as a social construction has not changed how it manifests. In the transformation agenda in higher education, the nuanced discourses of race as a social construction should therefore not detract from the reality of how race and racism manifests in the lived reality of people. As Jackson (2023, pg 1) explains, race affects "…approaches to developing and defining

measures of effectiveness in higher education. Identification of gaps in processes from different race perspectives is imperative for goal alignment and success". Without facing the entrenched norms concerning the social construction of race directly, effective transformation processes will remain deficient.

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