

# Participatory action research and the construction of academic identity among postgraduate research students

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the construction of academic identity among postgraduate research students who emerged from a participatory action research (PAR) project. The article reports on how postgraduate research students constructed their academic identity deliberately, as they pursue their studies in a sustainable learning environment (SuLE) project. The aim is to contribute towards an understanding of the impact PAR has on research work of postgraduate students in the Faculty of Education, at the University of the Free State, in South Africa. This paper draws on the work of Yosso's community cultural wealth to amplify how a relatively unexplored methodology in postgraduate research studies can change and contribute towards the social justice agenda, and give hope to an unequal society ruptured by apartheid. A critical emancipatory research theory of the Frankfurt school was used as the focal lens through which the literature was reviewed, together with a participatory action research process to generate data. Free attitude interviews were applied to focus groups, workshops, and meetings of Master's and doctoral research students, as well as individual supervisory dialogues, so as to ensure the in-depth views of the construction of students' academic identity. Video-tapes as an instrument in the generation of the data, which was transcribed into text and further analysed in line with the objectives of the study were used. Finally, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) technique was used to arrive at the following findings: (i) ingenious commitment to social justice; (ii) genuine commitment to serve communities; and (iii) inter-centricity of humanity in relations.

**Key words:** construction, academic Identity, postgraduate research students, participatory action research

## Introduction

Resulting from the revolutionary work of people, such as Tara J. Yosso, especially from the time when the sterling publication, titled "*Critical Race counter-stories along the Chicana/Chicano educational pipeline*" (2006) was published, the development and implementation of symmetrical communication methodologies have become an obligation in research (Zuber-Skerrit, 2004:149; Ladson-Billing, 2005 116; Yosso, 2006:303; Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson & Sookraj, 2009:894). This is particularly relevant during these critical times of a need for knowledge construction in South African higher education and for the conscious construction of academic identity among postgraduate research students, as

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potential knowledge producers in the world. Symmetrical communication is a concept used by the Frankfurt school of critical theory (Ballard & Belsky, 2010: 617). It is a core value in participatory action research (PAR) which refers to research done with a mutual respect for individual needs and differences, and with the recognition of one another as equal members. It means sharing responsibility for project outcomes, as well as for the processes of learning and team building (Boud & Lee, 2005:508; Zuber-Skerrit, 2004:149). Nkoane (2010:318) states that the current democratic state in South Africa with its new policies on higher education has placed greater emphasis than previously on addressing the injustices of the past in the institutions of higher learning. For instance, the government is particularly committed to increasing access to higher education for previously disadvantaged students. Based on the above, the aim in this paper is overtly intended to provide alternatives to dominant positivistic theories, and methodologies which have dominated the research agenda for some time. The paper further advocate for the usage of participatory action research particularly in high education which deals with human and not objects (Evans *et al.*, 2009:894; Mencke, 2013:3).

This paper documents the path, processes, and developments which fifty postgraduate research students went through in shaping their different academic identities, yet bonded together by a common agenda of emancipation in their respective spaces, work and communities (Butler, 2009:297). We draw from the six cultural capitals advocated and described in the work of Yosso's community cultural wealth to address a curious lacuna on how we construct our academic identities as postgraduate research students, in a sustainable learning environment project. Academic identity is a complex concept, focusing on being what you are or could be, and how you have been shaped by your personal characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and the social and political spheres, or how others see you or say who you are (Francis, 2012:148;Tatum, 1997:100). My focus in this article is on identity in the academic context in a sustainable learning environment (SuLE). An incubator, space, process and experiences through which postgraduate students are brought together to create a network of opportunities to participate in sharing and forming relationships and supporting one another to become different persons (Mahlomaholo, 2009:2; Mahlomaholo & Netshandama, 2011:314). SuLE focuses on fostering principles of social justice, care, love, equity, respect and inspiring hope (Mahlomaholo, 2012; 2). Thus, sustainable learning environments are network forums that can be used to enhance postgraduate students towards positive achievement. This network forum made up of a cohort supervisory team of lectures and student where a programme of postgraduate students is develop to provide support outside supervisor student contact in order to provide quality assurance in the students work.

We also offer our reflections to show how PAR enabled us to develop collaborative agencies and gain confidence as a result of critical conversations amongst ourselves, including the supervisory team who participated in the project and who are co-researchers in this project (Wehbi, 2009:503). For example on one occasion when we were engaged in a critical conversation on our different studies, a fellow student presenting his work to the large group, made a riveting presentation in which his language usage was so proficient that it caused some excitement. We were elated to observe how participants owned the project and were engaged in a process of symmetrical communication. One postgraduate research student said:

*You see, with PAR you can never go wrong. People are freer and you can see that there is a healthy relationship out there and the process is natural. No-one in this picture is bigger than the others.*

The above statement is a point we wish to discuss later in this paper; namely, how PAR can impact on the construction of academic Identity through language and communication. Words, which are used in communication are near abstractions and can be manipulated into the shape of meaning and coded by interpretation (Nkoane, 2012:99).

### **Theoretical framework**

We position this study in a conceptual framework that views the construction of academic identity among postgraduate research students as shaped by critical emancipatory research (CER) advocated by Mahlomaholo (2009:13) and developed from Habermas and the Frankfurt school's critical theory (Barton, 2005:321; Brenner, 2009:45; Mahlomaholo & Nkoane, 2002: 72; Mahlomaholo, 2009:13) and the community cultural wealth (CCW) approach of Yosso (2005). This framework informs our believe that:

1. The construction of academic Identity amongst postgraduate students requires the active involvement in an incubator for interaction, networking and exposure to critical dialogue.
2. Postgraduate research students have a well-developed socio-cultural background that should be respected and used for the critical, conscious construction of academic identity.
3. Postgraduate research students should go beyond personal gain and should avoid deficit frameworks by identifying the community cultural wealth and capitals that exist in communities, such as familial capital, linguistic capital, social capital, resistant capital, aspirational capital and navigational capital.
4. Postgraduate research students should contribute to positive change in the community in which the research is conducted. They should not be involved in the unethical practices of rigging people's wealth for personal gain and self-glory.

### **Critical Emancipatory Research Theory**

Through the critical emancipatory research (CER) lens, critical consciousness is raised. In other words, researcher and research participants work together as co-researchers to develop understanding and knowledge about the nature and root cause of an undesirable situation, in order to design strategies and marshal support to effect change (Nkoane, 2012:98; Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011:76). This confirms CER principles, since it cautions that human society is organised on the basis of the exercise of power for the purpose of bringing order, but sometimes power can be excessive requiring it to be challenged and subverted (Mahlomaholo, 2009:290; Mahlomaholo, 2011:5). In reflecting on the space of the postgraduate research student in education for sustainable learning environments, it is observed that extremes of inequality, social injustice, domination, side-lining, a lack of diversity, interracial strife, confrontation and a lack of hope can be demolished only through interaction with communities (Mahlomaholo, 2012:7). CER advocates closeness between the researchers and the research participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011:37). The research participants are not treated as if they are mere impersonal objects in a natural science laboratory. Rather, in CER, the researched are recognised and valued; thus treated with respect as fellow humans by the researcher (Mahlomaholo & Nkoane, 2002: 74; Mahlomaholo, 2009:225). CER advocates peace, hope, equality, team spirit and social justice; thus, CER is changing people's

hearts and minds, liberating them and meeting the needs of real life. This can be classified as follows: success/worth; fun/enjoyment; freedom/choice; and belonging/respect/love (Foulger, 2010:135). For instance, MacCabe and Holmes (2009:1519) argue that critical research involves the co-creation of the research agenda by the researcher and researched participants. This premise thus justifies our adoption of this paradigm.

### **Community cultural wealth**

Yosso's interpretation of community cultural wealth is attributable to the varieties of the validated emancipation of the Chicana/Chicano people and can be applicable to a variety of communities. Yosso identifies six components that reside within diverse communities in general and in the Chicana/Chicano people in particular (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011:76). These six components culturally validate their strength: linguistic capital, resistant capital, navigational capital, social capital, familial capital and aspirational capital (Yosso: 2006:23; Yosso & Garcia, 2007:146). To possess linguistic capital is to have skills and tools developed through communication experiences in more than one language (Yamamura, Shaw & Stalh, 2011:267). Resistant capital comprises the value, knowledge and tools used to nurture oppositional behaviour that challenges and stands in opposition to equality (James, 2012:44). Navigational capital is concerned with the skills needed to navigate through unfamiliar or non-inclusive environments. Familial and social capital focuses on knowledge and understanding that are nurtured and passed on through relationships with networks of family and friends (Yosso & Garcia, 2007:146). To have aspirational capital is to have high expectations, to stay focused on one's goals and to remain resilient, regardless of the perceived barriers and hardships (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011:76). We have observed that these capitals are not only important to ensure day-to-day survival but also vital to our construction of our academic identities (Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010:4). Yosso's CCW approach is integral to this study for the reason that the different forms of capital are consistent and CCW permits one to observe their complexity and perplexing nature.

### **Participatory action research**

PAR originates from the field of adult education, international development and the social sciences and is an inclusive inquiry often practised in cross-cultural contexts (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005:560; Kemmis, Wilkinson, Hardy & Edwards-Groves, 2010:112). PAR is more than a method of conducting research, but an orientation to research and rooted in emancipatory movements. The concept, participatory research originates in Tanzania in the early 1970s, rooted in its work with oppressed people in developing areas (Schneider, 2012:2334). PAR is a process which combines systematic research education with the development of a practical intervention action (Khanlou & Peter, 2004:2334; Chapman & Dold, 2009:1). PAR engages the participants so that their voices can be heard and respected. Participatory action research has three distinct elements as the driving force; namely: a shared ownership of the research project; a community-based analysis of social problems; and an orientation towards community action (Kemmis, 2006:462; Titterton & Smart, 2008:57; Kemmis, 2010a:19; Shea, Poudrier, Tomas, Jeffrey & Kiskotagan, 2013: 4). The goal is to ensure that everyday knowledge is used to shape the lives of ordinary people (Cameron & Gibson, 2005:317). PAR values the local and indigenous knowledge of marginalised groups, as a basis for revolutionary actions, which can improve the lives of people. Francis (2012:149)

contends that the concept 'marginal' can be used to describe any person who, for some reason, does not fit into the mainstream mould and who, for whatever reason, straddles two or more conflicted social identities. For the purpose of this study, academic identity refers to knowing who you are, in the academic sense. According to Kemmis (2010a:11), revolutionary action can be understood on a smaller scale, meaning action aimed at a self-conscious change of people's circumstances and of themselves. "People working together in an action research initiative might reasonably contest what counts as *the right thing to do* at any moment" (Kemmis, 2010:417). They can however, proceed towards consensus about what to do as a group, by giving and weighing reasons, and by being alert to power differentials that may distort their decision-making process (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008:451; Kemmis, Wilkinson, Hardy Edwards-Groves, 2009:14; Kemmis, 2010b:418). It is worth noting that a research method may inspire and empower some groups, while others are alienated from it even if it is not the intention. For instance, a research project may support established power structures by increasing the power of groups who are already privileged (Mattsson & Kemmis, 2007:196; MacNamara & MacNamara, 2011:33). Ownership and participation address concerns about buy-in and the recognition by target participants which include engagement in the process of determining the input and output of services (Chapman & Dold, 2009:5). In short, PAR is a collaborative effort to address issues in specific systems. It is a collaborative, cyclical, reflective research design that focuses on problem solving, improving work practices, and understanding the effect of the research or intervention as part of the research process. It explicitly calls for making sense of the impact of change, and refining actions based on this impact (Leykim, Pugh, Lanham, Harmon & McDaniel Jr, 2009:8). Based on the above, W report in this paper on our reflections on the use of PAR in our different research projects and how these research actions have impacted on the construction of our academic identities as postgraduate research students.

### **The impact of Participatory Action Research**

Earlier, we mentioned returning to the following point: how PAR can impact on the construction of academic Identity. The main aim of PAR as we see it is to give participants an opportunity to engage in identification or acknowledging the existence of the problem; studying the problem; analysing it and designing ways of addressing the problem. We conducted the study at a local university, among ourselves as postgraduates, drawing from Yosso's CCW. He cautions that although the impression created through university advertisements as a form of recruiting students, portrays unchecked optimism, exciting encounters, and numerous opportunities. Few students anticipate that their university experience might be marked by on-going racialised and gendered incidents questioning their academic merit, cultural knowledge, physical presence, age, and the subjection to selection tests ( Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solorzano, 2009: 659; Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011:75). Nineteen years into democracy, students from marginalised communities still face charges of being unqualified and 'out of place in some South African universities. This happens in spite of the enabling educational, legislative and policy context in South Africa (Mahlomaholo, 2012:4). Through PAR, we engaged fifty postgraduate research students, who are registered for either Master's or doctoral studies and who participate in sustainable learning environments as an incubator, to enable them to complete their studies successfully. As fellow students also use the PAR approach in their respective studies, we focused on the influence of PAR in the construction of their academic identities, using CCW as the underpinning

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framework. In SuLE, we were impressed by how much time, effort and energy the supervisory team and the students spent in making the project and final presentation a great success (Mahlomaholo, Francis & Nkoane, 2010:283). On a monthly basis, every student is afforded the opportunity to present his/her work to the SuLE community, resulting in critical dialogue, reflection, acknowledgement, advice and a deeper understanding of the project. All participants are motivated to work hard, share and learn together in a collegial spirit with a shaped goal. There is interaction and fun, lots of energy and excitement. Participants are free to select their topic and many other aspects of their projects, with creativity, innovations and surprises resulting, especially when participants explore alternative solutions (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007:338; Stahl, Tremblay & Le Rouge, 2011:11). Participants form alliances and networks (working and smaller ground in a local environment), thus bringing together shared goals and working in close proximity to one another. Gradually, participants develop a common language and culture, using critical emancipatory theory, which results in a respect for and an appreciation of one another (Water & Comeau, 2010:4; Wly, 2011:890). There is willingness to share knowledge and information; to cooperate and, collaborate; a readiness to self-critique and critique from others; to admit one's ignorance or failure; to be honest to others and ones-self; and to use the processes of self-reflection and the reflection of others to take the necessary action. Participants are willing to suspend their need for power authority and control (Kemmis, 2009:466; Van der Velde & Ogilvie, 2009:8). A spirit of trust is engendered with a focus on learning and applying the task at hand, so as to realise real improvement. Mutual respect for individual needs and differences, together with the recognition of one another as equal team members, can be achieved through PAR.

## **Method and design**

The PAR notion communicated above forms the context within which we approached and operationalised the study. Thus, this research is fundamentally qualitative and conducted in a participatory action research mode. The coordinating team selected PAR, because of its commonality amongst the researchers in assisting them to respond to the research question: How to construct academic identity among postgraduate research students? The same principle of CER was also used by all the participants as the archetype in which their studies were couched. This was selected because of its emancipatory agenda which was seen as a means to improve, validate and support the policy initiatives of government in its quest to eradicate the tenacious remnants of colonial and apartheid legacies (Kalmer, 2013:14). PAR is an inclusionary mode that complements critical emancipatory research as its tenants are geared towards empowerment and are emancipatory in nature. We agreed to consciously implement the SuLE project as a familial capital crafted in CCW that would definitely yield results. Only one question was formulated by the team which sought answers to how postgraduate student leaders experienced their participation in SuLE. The study involved collective, community-based research, since all participants benefited on the basis of shared responsibility. In this way, participants were engaged in critical dialogue, seeking to respond to the question at hand. There was a united agreement on problem identification; voluntarism and communal reflection; shared advantage and coalition dependence by participants (Khan & Chovanec, 2010:38). The eagerness to contribute to this research project shaped by the engagement and involvement of the participants in SuLE, was a positive sign which stimulated participation (Macdonald, 2012:43; Lightfoot & Williams,

2009:211) and all available tools were used to communicate among ourselves. In the first meeting we identified the most troubling concerns that the participants expressed; thereafter, we agreed to continue with the thematic concern. Four members volunteered to assist me and we were included as the coordinating team. All participants were familiar with one another due to past history, and again, we had had between three months and three years of working together in the SuLE project; thus, it was not difficult to convince others to participate in the study. This was driven by a collective vision shared by the students and clearly articulated what we needed to achieve. Students came together in a planning meeting and reflected on their work. Thus, it was easy, since everyone had to reflect on his/her own work by looking at the video tapes we had recorded in the past and compared different presentation, we compared our first presentations with the third. For instance, everybody felt there was a significant improvement from the first presentation of work to the current work. Critically interrogating the presentations which enabled collective reflection; obtaining feedback; and then going back to improve on the work and presentation again, was done. Teams also supported one another on the basis of a common vision.

### **Data generation**

We implemented the Free Attitude Interview (FAI) performance recommended by Meulenberg-Buskens (2011:1). The Free Attitude Interview technique was used creatively and as an instrument for data collection because it has elements of respect for people and the question used only as a means to initiate a conversation. This is then followed by a reflective summary, thus persuading contributors and inspiring them to reason prudently about their arguments (Mahlomaholo, 2009:228). The term Free Attitude Interview can be traced back to Vrolijk and Timmerman (Meulenberg-Buskens 2011:1). Meulenberg-Buskens opines that the FAI is non-directive in nature, unlocks the space for the participants to intervene and thus, it is possible for the researcher and researched to assess and negotiate issues of consistency and legitimacy emphasised in positivist and phenomenologist paradigms (Buskens, 2011:2). The FAI allowed us to engage in reflexivity as a means to regulate the effects of researcher preconception and its impact on the research process. We also used diverse ICT tools: e-mail and discussion room, in learning management systems. In addition, we had large monthly gatherings for a period of three months, as well as fortnightly focus groups. These sessions had a great influence on how we related to one another; the way we greeted, talked and did things; for example, time consciousness and caring for one another (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009:82). We also became very close to one another and served on different forums in our respective communities. We have had a long history as people who either meet at undergraduate studies, in the workplace, or in the local community. We started with an analysis of the political, economic, social, technological, legal and physical environments (PESTLE) in which we found ourselves and which impacted on us. We then engaged in establishing our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) to analyse where we were in terms of our academic identities. We also engaged in team-building exercises, and generated data through regular dialogue in different focus groups, using presentations and videotaping all our gatherings. By engaging in many activities, such as: ICT training; academic writing skills workshops; social networking forums, such as Facebook; public lectures by critical scholars across disciplines; conversations with various experts in curriculum and education studies, we have broadened our knowledge significantly. We had training on the learning management system called Blackboard, used for eLearning

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purposes; we gathered in different places of choice and learnt from different communities. Anyone could be approached to help a fellow student in his/her project. The entire group of postgraduate research students participated as co-researchers and assisted one another to overcome pitfalls. Many of our gatherings were videotaped and transcribed into text. The video recorder was not seen as a problem, as the camera was on a stand used regularly in the group meetings. Thus, members encouraged video recordings and we consented to this prior to the research. Participants did not appear to have a problem with this, as most of them suggested creative ways on how to conduct the research. One participant emphasised that everyone should understand the double role of the researcher and the researched, while another participant pointed out that no-one should be forced to participate and that this should be stressed at all the meetings.

### **Data analysis**

As research team, we used critical discourse analysis and then discussed emerging themes, using the framework of CCW. We engaged in critical discourse and reflected on the data which consisted of twenty pages of transcriptions produced from various video footage recorded for sixty minutes. It was advantageous that most of the presentations displayed on video were already in text form. Thus we could observe the conversational performance of the presenters as the documented text could be clearly read from the video footage and could be paused in order to comprehend the text transcriptions which comprised twenty pages. The video recordings from each focus group and the meetings held from our research projects in our respective monthly meetings and virtual discussions were included. The recordings were translated verbatim. This information was generated in the form of minutes of meetings and virtual discussions on the learning management system (Blackboard). We used critical discourse analysis advocated by Teun van Dijk which focuses on an understanding of what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play a role in these approaches of knowledge production (van Dijk, 1993:250; van Dijk 2009:230). We decide to focus on only three of the six capitals, with special attention to how we constructed our academic identity using the participatory action research approach.

### **Findings**

#### **Ingenuous commitment to effect social justice as an academic identity**

From the inception of the project we learnt from one of the co-researchers that: “with PAR you can never go wrong as people are perceived to be freer. You can see that there is a healthy relationship out there; the process is natural and no-one in this picture is bigger than the others”.

We analysed what one of the postgraduate research students believes, that people have to be free when constructing academic identity and that freedom can be achieved only through aspirations towards social justice. Again, the use of the word ‘bigger’ implies issues of power, and thus, there is an appeal to the principle of equality in CER. Drawing from the CCW framework, both social and aspirational capital can be used to build on the construction of an academic identity. For example, aspirational capital means to have high expectations, staying focused on one’s objective and remaining resilient, regardless of the perceived barriers and real hardships. Social capital consists of networks of people and community resources, such as

community organisations. It can also refer to knowledge and understanding that are nurtured and passed on through relationships and networks. SuLE as a network platform nurtures postgraduate students and privileges them above others who lack this facility.

### **Genuine commitment to serve communities as an academic identity**

Postgraduate students see themselves as having the purpose of serving their respective communities as an academic identity. Drawing from the CCW framework experience, some students' proposals are rejected, but they are resilient and continue to persevere irrespective of the barriers and hardships. This situation is common to many researchers reading for PhDs; however, there are also success stories of those who write their proposals within three months with positive outcomes. Some students have completed their PhDs in eighteen months, due to their unwavering commitment to achieving their personal goals and to serving their communities. Resistant capital can be used to fight inequalities, particularly educational inequalities.

### **Inter-centricity of humanity in relation to an academic identity**

A sound culture of respect for everyone exists and this quality is interdependent; thus, when decisions are made, everyone's ideas are sought, valued and considered. We have an in-house arrangement where we rotate as session chairpersons to facilitate our regular conversations or interventions. Evident to this, the conversation we had with "Tumelo" (Pseudo name of a co-researcher) was as follows:

*My impression of the team is that humanity comes first; I have come to practise what I took for granted for years, that indeed 'Motho ke Motho Ka Batho' (a human is a human through people). PAR has helped me to reflect on this statement over and over again.*

Our team worked closely together, using the same paradigm of learning and research, and usually came to respect and appreciate one another. The CCW framework displayed through linguistic capital, focusing on the skill and tools, developed through communication. We were also able to venture into new ways of thinking: we used internet search engines to acquire information which was relevant to our different study areas and we participated in public lectures (Mantoura & Potvin, 2012: 4). We were also shown how to use the learning management system, together with the Blackboard portal for our discussions. SuLE provided an opportunity for postgraduate research students to come together to share their experiences among themselves, with the support of the supervisory team. During the SuLE gatherings the students are given opportunities to showcase their project, wherein they come up with tangible results and successes from completing or working on a project; at this stage they are now 'fairly expert' in their chosen areas. They share their expertise with the rest of the SuLE community and in most cases, they draw from their cultural knowledge, for instance.

We have used CDA, as a device to attain the above results, since CDA can be used in readings concerning discourse, power, domination, social discrimination and the position of the discourse analyst in relation in such relations (van Dijk, 1993:249). CDA involves answers for difficult connections between text talk, social cognition, power, society and culture which we followed in this study. We analysed texts, unpacking them in order to deepen our understanding of the practices of postgraduate research in the construction academic identity and in the acquisition of progress and attainment. CER is the fundamental

component used by all the members in their separate studies, and in the collective procedure which they have chosen. PAR supports researchers and demystifies the research process, allowing for the reliable generation of data as all contributors aim for excellence in their projects.

## Discussions and implications

Findings from the study indicate that academic identity is constructed, dynamic and always in process. The findings are consistent with the literature that: identity is complex and changes from contact to contact in a social context. This is proved in the text below written by one of the postgraduate students through e-mail:

*(sic):I have just received your e-mail and gone through it. I just want to find out the date for the next meeting. The PAR meeting we had the other time I was presenting was indeed a good one.*

*I learned a couple of things(,) which I have incorporated in my latest submission. Apart from that these meetings makes one's journey in the research less threatening. I wish we could sell the idea and have the team grow even bigger.*

The message above indicates that the student sees value in PAR and has influenced the student to see the bigger picture; to connect issues, events and facts in a holistic way; and to appreciate the SuLE as the basis of long-term competitive advantage. Emerging from these issues, the student may be made aware of the concerns of other students in general. Thus, the construction of ingenuous commitment to social justice as an academic identity can be said to develop when the student believes that all other students should be nurtured through the SuLE project. This can be realised through their participation and the implementation of inclusionary approaches. Our findings show that developing social and aspirational capitals through the SuLE project taps into postgraduate research students' cultural wealth and fosters CCW, which are sustainable forms of postgraduate research involvement. The project which empowered both the students and the supervisory team, reminds researchers to be aware of the capital that exists within the student community and thus engenders respect for students as fellow human beings. Researchers should re-examine what sustainable learning environments in a participatory action research mode really means. As Yosso points out, CCW enables us to identify and validate the dormant and unstated knowledge held by participants who historically, have been considered as lacking any knowledge and culture (Gota, 2010:8; Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011:82; Mahlomaholo, 2012:3).

The postgraduate research students see themselves as having the purpose of serving their respective communities. Thus, we categorised this as a genuine commitment to serve communities as an academic identity. For instance, one student argued that:

*(sic) ... Lastly, I can see the changes that have been taking place within me since I join the group. I have been greatly imparted by the CER/PAR research paradigm which has taught me that it is very easy to be the change that you expect to see in this world. And as you change, you will respect the changes that are happening in the lives of others. The great principles of CER like democracy, humility, respect, hope, inclusiveness, peace, freedom, etc. have really touched me and I see how they can be used to suggest changes in any social milieu that is seeking for the change that they desire. These principles really*

*get home when we sit in our CER/PAR group to ensure that we are all working towards building sustainable environments through these principles.*

The literature confirms that PAR is premised on a set of principles and related practices that promote a commitment to action and social justice, especially with the goal of exposing and changing relationships of power (Evans et al., 2012:896). In the SuLE projects students start to develop a culture of service throughout their involvement in the project and learn from the presentations of others what the actual value of research is. The participants are encouraged to focus on the learning process, as well as on action, tasks, products and improving performance through reflection on their work, as well as through decision making and questioning their insights as they move through the project. Research also attests that students who have caring, supportive mechanisms in their lives are more likely to succeed academically (Liou & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2009:536; Guishard, 2009:90). The response above shows that the student uses familial capital, which makes reference to cultural practices in the SuLE and knowledge that relies on extended familial relationships. These relationships enable the construction and maintenance of collective understanding around emotions and educational and occupational relationships (Markic & Eilks, 2011:152; Masadeh, 2012:131). Furthermore, resistant capital was also applied with the students demonstrating elements of patience which can be realised only when there is hope. Similarly, students become conscious of critical emancipatory research aspects, thus demonstrating the internalisation of the principles of CER. This ultimately, leads to the construction of genuine commitment to serve communities. To support the argument above, the following extract from one of the students validates the construction of the abovementioned academic identity:

*I must confess that since I joined the CER/PAR group and realised that it was participatory action towards building each other's research, that really troubled me. I say 'troubled' because this was the first time in my research life of seeing a group discussing individual research work. I had always seen and perceived research as a lonely journey and a private affair between the student and the supervisor. But here, I was called upon to belong to a group where we presented our work for peer review and group critique. After attending a number of these sessions my mindset has not only developed, but has been utterly modified. I can see my peers as friends and colleagues and not as competitors in the journey of research.*

Lastly, the impact of PAR on postgraduate research students has led to the construction of academic identity through an intense reflection on the linguistic capital which makes reference to the various ways in which people are able to communicate in more than one language and in other forms of expression, such as art, music and poetry. Navigational capital was also used through which we were able to navigate within the parameters of SuLE, to be included in the postgraduate research process, previously dominated by white, Afrikaans-speaking people. This can be seen in the extract below:

*For the first time I had a chance to express myself in front of a big crowd and to open up my work for critique by my peers. This taught me to be reflective and reflect on my own thinking and change my picture about research. Yes, research is about understanding the 'phenomenon' as one would normally say, but through PAR and through critical emancipatory research, it actually ends up as a double gain, making a real contribution. This is accompanied by pride through collective contribution ... my attitude towards my love and confidence for my peers has increased. I have suddenly become open-minded, receptive, cooperative and ready to share whatever I have, for the benefit of the entire*

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*group. This change is motivated by the new principles from which I have benefited - the mutual empowerment that we have all gained during our group activities.*

PAR promotes returning the power of knowledge production and the use of it to ordinary people and oppressed people; thus contributing to the democratisation of the research process and the promotion of social transformation (Hanrahan, 2005:22; Evans *et al.*, 2012:899). For example, the extract above shows how different PAR as a mode is, since it brings human elements, such as: love, cooperation, collective contribution and sharing. These words show how linguistic capital can be used to promote humanity which ultimately results in academic identity which centres on humanity. PAR unearths the humanity in students, unlike in mainstream research which emphasises 'objectivity' claiming neutrality which can never be possible in humans. One of the core values of PAR is synergy; according to Zuber-Skerrit (2004:148) synergy is a willingness to share knowledge, information and skills for problem solving. Thus, collectivism in PAR can lead students to centre their studies on human beings, as has been demonstrated by students in the SuLE project. The above extracts from the participants show that the students and leaders have acquired multiple skills which serve as an advantage when compared to students who have not been exposed to the SuLE project (Kindon & Elwood, 2005:26). The participants also show that the skills they have acquired range from technology to good communication skills, such as virtual discussions, blogging and podcasting. They have also acquired social skills, such as sound human relationships, respect and the ability to recognise their own faults, together with an appreciation of the support of others. It seems that there was an acknowledgement of a reliance on other students and became knowingly aware of their involvement in the project as researchers, as well as those being researched (Delman, 2012:162). This fosters a natural understanding of people and gives the research process an authenticity, unlike the superficial elements of control and controllable from which other modes claim to be free. Inexorably, at the core of other modes of research is the cog which turns the wheel of continuing the underclass and marginalised people; research as a money-making process, without any contribution to the community in which the research is conducted (Derr, Chawla, Mintzer, Cushing & van Vliet, 2013:493).

## **Conclusion**

While symmetrical research methodologies, address issues which deal with mutual respect for individual needs and differences, it has been demonstrated in this paper that research can also enhance human life. In this study, the construction of academic identity has been described. Participatory action research methodology has been discussed to provide an overview of how it was applied in a SuLE project. A brief prognosis of the postgraduate research student incubator which was used to drive team sharing and shared responsibility for the project outcomes, as well as mutual learning and team building, was also discussed. How the construction of academic identity was achieved, based on the findings, was indicated. The following findings were reported: an ingenuous commitment to social justice, with postgraduate students showing a strong commitment to social justice, particularly on the basis of drawing from community cultural wealth. With a genuine commitment to serving the people, postgraduate research students seem to have acquired impetus to serve their respective communities; this is also viewed as a constructed academic identity. Finally, through the use of the participatory research mode, postgraduate research students see themselves as researchers who view human relations as shaping their academic identity. The conceptual

framework of the study was described with a special focus on critical emancipatory theory and the theory of community cultural wealth advocated by Tara Yosso, was also used.

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