

# **THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN UNDERTAKING DOCTORAL STUDIES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY**

by

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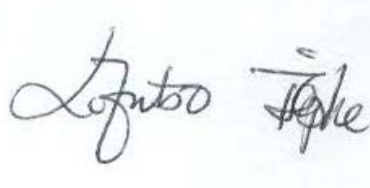
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## Declaration

I declare that this dissertation hereby submitted for the Master of Arts in Higher Education Studies in the Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, is my own work and that I have not previously submitted this work, either as a whole or in part, for a qualification at another university or at another faculty at this university. I further cede copyright of this work to the University of the Free State.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L Ts'ephe', is written on a light blue background.

October 2014

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L Ts'ephe

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Date

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation builds on and contributes to work in the fields of higher education and the capabilities approach. Specifically, it investigates the educational biographies of a small number ( $n=7$ ) of black women who were either in their final year of doctoral study or had graduated recently at the time of the interviews. Although a number of studies (e.g. Acker, 1980; Magano, 2011; Pillay, 2009; Prozesky, 2008) have investigated women in academia, there has not been a strong focus on the experiences of black women in doctoral studies, and even less so on South African students. The available studies show that students leave doctoral programmes prematurely due to a number of reasons, for example, an inability to manage time effectively, financial constraints, demotivation and depression, and poor supervision (Magano, 2011). Pillay (2009) adds that the balancing of two lives, being a mother and an employee, generates further challenges. As part of its National Development Plan, South Africa's National Planning Commission aims to not only rapidly increase the number of doctoral graduates, but to also promote postgraduate education for marginalised groups within the next 15 years. In 2012, black women represented 2 294 (16.4%) of all doctoral enrolments in the country, which is a significant increase from the 468 (7.5%) who enrolled for doctoral studies in the year 2000.

The current research draws conceptually on the capabilities approach, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This framework was chosen because it is used mainly to evaluate and assess an individual's well-being, as well as the social arrangements that foster or hinder this well-being. The capabilities approach, therefore, includes issues such as the design of policies and proposals for social change within societies (Robeyns, 2005) and relates the evaluation of the quality of life to the assessment of the capability to function; that is, to be and do in ways which are valued by an individual. A qualitative approach was adopted for the study as the most suitable method. A case study design allows the researcher to emphasise the experiences of the individual, as well as the social arrangements which help or hinder each individual's success. In-depth information regarding the participants' social experiences was also gathered.

The issue that was explored in this study was black women's experience of doctoral study – the highs, the lows, and the challenges. The assumption was that gender plays a significant role in shaping the educational lives of these women. In the study, gender is understood as the social organisation of the relations between the sexes, differentiating the social meaning that is attributed to sexual differences from the sexual differences themselves (Robeyns, 2005). Exploring these women's experiences revealed the developmental outcomes of



doctoral education they value, the opportunities to reach these outcomes they appreciated, and the personal, social and environmental factors which influenced their ability to use the developmental opportunities. The findings from this study could lead to recommendations to higher education institutions with regard to increasing the enrolment and retention of this marginalised group. These recommendations could also contribute to improving policies which attract and retain more black women doctoral students in higher education.

Keywords: Gender, Race, Capabilities Approach, Doctoral Students, Academic Mothers

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie verhandeling bou voort op en lewer 'n bydrae tot vorige navorsing in die velde van hoër onderwys en die vermoënsbenadering. Die studie ondersoek spesifiek die opvoedkundige biografieë van 'n klein aantal ( $n=7$ ) swart vroue wat ten tye van die onderhoude óf in hulle finale jaar van doktrale studie was óf onlangs gegradeer het. Alhoewel daar tog 'n aantal studies (vgl. Acker, 1980; Magano, 2011; Pillay, 2009; Prozesky, 2008) is wat vroue in die akademie ondersoek, is daar nog nie 'n sterk fokus geplaas op die belewenisse van swart vroue in doktrale studie, en nog minder op Suid-Afrikaanse studente, nie. Studies toon dat studente hulle doktrale studie weens 'n aantal redes staak, byvoorbeeld ondoeltreffende tydsbestuur, finansiële beperkings, demotivering en depressie, asook swak studieleiding (Magano, 2011). Pillay (2009) noem 'n verdere uitdaging, naamlik om ewewig te bewerkstellig tussen om 'n ma te wees en om 'n werknemer/student te wees. As deel van sy Nasionale Ontwikkelingsplan, poog ons land se Nasionale Beplanningskommissie om nie net die aantal doktrale gegradueerdes beduidend te vermeerder nie, maar om ook nagraadse opvoeding onder gemarginaliseerde groepe binne die volgende 15 jaar te bevorder. In 2012 het swart vroue 2 294 (16,4%) van alle doktrale inskrywings uitgemaak, 'n beduidende toename van die 468 (7,5%) swart vroue wat in 2000 vir doktrale studie ingeskryf het.

Die navorsing in hierdie studie put op konseptuele vlak uit die vermoënsbenadering wat deur Amartya Sen en Martha Nussbaum ontwikkel is. Dié raamwerk is uiters geskik omdat dit hoofsaaklik fokus op die evaluering en assessering van 'n individu se welsyn, asook op die sosiale organisering wat hierdie welsyn bevorder of belemmer. Dit behels dus onder meer die ontwerp van beleid en voorstelle vir sosiale verandering binne samelewings (Robeyns, 2005) en bring die evaluering van lewensgehalte met die assessering van die vermoë om te funksioneer, in verband. Om te funksioneer, in hierdie konteks, beteken om die mens te wees en die dinge te doen wat jy hoog op prys stel. 'n Kwalitatiewe benadering is in die studie gevolg as die mees geskikte metode. Met 'n gevallestudie-ontwerp kan die klem gelê word op die ervarings en vereistes van die individu, asook die sosiale organisering wat elke persoon se sukses bevorder of belemmer. Diepgaande inligting rakende die deelnemers se sosiale belewenisse is ook ingesamel.

Die kwessie wat in die navorsing verken is, is swart vroue se belewenisse van doktrale studie – die hoogtepunte, die laagtepunte en die uitdagings. Die veronderstelling was dat gender 'n beduidende rol speel in die vorming van hierdie vroue se opvoedkundige lewe. In

hierdie studie word gender verstaan as die sosiale organisering van die verhoudings tussen die geslagte, waar die sosiale betekenis wat aan geslagsverskille toegeskryf word van die geslagsverskille op sigself onderskei word (Robeyns, 2005). Die verkenning van hierdie vroue se belewenisse het verskeie bevindings gelewer: die ontwikkelingsuitkomst van doktrale opvoeding wat hulle as waardevol beskou; die geleenthede wat hulle as waardevol beskou om hierdie uitkomst te bereik; en die persoonlike, sosiale en omgewingsfaktore wat hulle vermoë beïnvloed het om die ontwikkelingsgeleenthede te benut. Die studie se bevindings kan lei tot aanbevelings vir hoërondewysinstansies rakende die toename in inskrywings en die behoud van hierdie gemarginaliseerde groep. Hierdie aanbevelings kan 'n bydrae lewer tot die verbetering van beleid ten einde die aantal swart vroulike doktrale studente in hoër ondewys te verhoog en hulle te behou.

Sleutelwoorde: Gender, Ras, Vermoënsbenadering, Doktrale Studente, Akademiese Moeders

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

### Introduction

The relationship between education and earning potential has been documented by numerous researchers (Haleman, 2004). However, education has a far greater effect than merely enhancing the economic well-being of people; education provides students with the knowledge and skills to deal with the challenges they face in their career and life journeys. According to Nussbaum (2006), public education is vital for a healthy democracy. Public education therefore responds to the basic need of individuals to receive education which, once acquired, plays a significant role in the expansion of other capabilities (Terzi, 2004). Walker (2005) gives an example by stating that the acquisition of numerical skills is crucial in succeeding in mathematics which, in turn, opens up a range of career opportunities.

Education, whether formal or informal, is a fundamental human right (Unterhalter, 2005) and it is essential that all people, regardless of gender, race, class or sex orientation have access to education. The United Nations (UN, 2007) clearly indicate that the right to education is high on the agenda of the international community; hence the numerous human rights treaties that have been recognised by governments as key in the pursuit of development and social transformation. Doctoral education is, however, not a right, but important for black women in particular, because doctoral study is regarded globally as a way of improving human development and advancing economic development (Stromquist, 2006).

Despite the fact that doctoral education is not a right, it has become a global concern to increase the number of doctoral graduates (Herman, 2011a; Johnson, Lee & Green, 2000; National Planning Commission, 2011). As part of its National Development Plan, South Africa's National Planning Commission (NPC), aims to rapidly increase the number of doctoral graduates and promote graduate education for marginalised groups in the next 15 years (Academy of Science of South Africa, 2010). Policies have been formulated to redress the past inequalities brought about by apartheid and, thus, increase the number of black students in higher education (HE), particularly black women students. Unfortunately, the marriage between policy and practice is often not successful because black women undertaking doctoral studies still constituted only 16.4% of all doctoral enrolments in 2012 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2014). This has increased from 7.5% in 2000 and, though a significant change, it is still very low, considering that black women

constitute a largest percentage of the population in South Africa. According to the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2007), legislation being in place is not enough, as too often legislation is not implemented due to inadequate resources, a lack of capacities in the ability to implement policy, a lack of public demand, and low levels of information, awareness and training, etc. Moreover, there are no means of redress if the rights that the legislation introduces are not respected (UNESCO, 2007). Adding to the list of reasons as to why legislation is not put into practice, specifically in HE, I highlight the fact that, since HE institutions were originally established for men (Johnson-Bailey, 2004), they still do not accommodate women students. As Haake (2011: 115) states, "higher education institutions have a long way to go concerning gender equality" due to cultural practices that restrict both men and women to specified roles which are taught through socialisation.

This study explores the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies at a South African university because, unlike white women, black women in HE have not received rightful attention (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). For the purposes of this study, it is essential to clarify that 'black' only refers to black African women and excludes Coloured and Indian/Asian women as opposed the common classification that came about under the former apartheid government in South Africa where races were divided into black, white, coloured and Indian/Asians.

### **Problem statement**

Doctoral attrition is a concern worldwide and has come under scrutiny (Carter, Blumenstein & Cook, 2013; Herman, 2011a). Factors such as a lack of supervision, a lack of funds, demotivation of students, and family commitment are some of the reasons for attrition (Magano, 2011). However, this dissertation focuses mainly on gender inequality, which is seen as the underlying issue in female attrition, particularly for black women in doctoral studies (Carter et al. 2013). This research specifically investigates how to attract and retain black women in doctoral studies by identifying and documenting the challenges and successes they experience throughout their academic journey. This could be helpful in implementing strategies to increase the number of black women students who complete their doctorates within the required time.

In 2005, 29% of doctoral graduates in South Africa were black, both men and women (Centre for Research on Science and Technology, 2009). The number of women doctoral graduates increased to 42% in 2009. From the 2005 figure, however, the percentage of black women is not evident. Moreover, we cannot assume that women's relative success in terms of percentage indicates that the issue of equality has been resolved (DHET, 2014). Of

the 160 000 or more HE graduates in South Africa in 2011, only around 1 500 were doctoral students, of which less than half were women (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013). In 2012, black women doctoral students amounted to 37.6% of all females who enrolled for doctoral studies.

South African scholars state that balancing two lives – that of being a mother and an employee/student, or being an “academic mothers” (Pillay, 2009) – generates further challenges. In general, women have been disadvantaged and marginalised worldwide under patriarchal systems. Gender has been the main organising principle within societies since the beginning of time. As Cvikova (2003) argues, girls and boys have different roles to play in society; hence, in most cultures, boys are socialised differently from girls. For instance, women are assigned the roles of child-bearing, while men are perceived as providers for their families. This confirms the claim of feminist theories that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex and that gender is thus culturally constructed (Butler, 1990).

My study conceptualises gender through a feminist lens because it explores the experience of black women who are affected by gender inequalities. Women rose up against male dominance even before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Kinser (2004: 127), “the ideas of feminism were existent long before the first wave, however had not been organised into an identifiable movement until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.” Feminism refers to a movement against sexism, women’s exploitation and oppression (hooks, 2000: 1). Feminism will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

South Africa’s history continues to have an impact on HE. My concern is that, irrespective of many global initiatives, black women in doctoral studies still constitute a minority because those who do enrol in doctoral programmes drop out prematurely (Magano, 2011). Haake (2011: 115) indicates that “female drop-outs from doctoral studies should be explained by academic cultures that provide women with fewer opportunities, unequal chances to take up leadership positions and limited support. Therefore cultural change is required.”

### **Research argument**

In this study, I argue for the expansion of capabilities with the aim to enhance black women’s well-being by completing their doctoral studies for intrinsic development. Thus, I will explore black women’s experiences through the capabilities lens.

### **Theoretical framework**

The capabilities approach (CA), as Sen (1999) defines it, is a framework that evaluates and assesses individuals’ well-being, as well as the social arrangements that foster or hinder this well-being. It does not only emphasise individuals’ functionings (“the state of a person,”

particularly the beings and doings that lead to a valued life [Sen, 1993]), but also the freedoms and opportunities (capabilities) that individuals have and the influence that conversion factors have on achieving their valued/desired functionings. These functionings can be divided into three categories: personal (e.g. metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skill, intelligence); social (e.g. public policies, social norms, gender roles, power relations, societal hierarchies); and environmental (e.g. climate, geographical location). In addition, agency is an essential factor for achieving valued/desired functionings. Agency refers to one's ability to achieve what one values, by acting towards the achievement and bringing about change in this way (Walker, 2005).

The CA evaluates policies according to their impact on people's capabilities and their actual functionings. In situations where people are able to attain functionings- for instance a functioning to be healthy, CA evaluates whether the necessary resources are available to produce healthy lives, whether there are health facilities, doctors and nurses to provide services, clean water and sanitation, etc. It is unrealistic to expect people to flourish without the freedoms and opportunities that enhance well-being.

Scholars have written a great deal on women in academia (Bradley, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Lynch, 2008; Strauss, 2001), though not much on the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies. I chose to explore the experiences of these women through a CA lens, the reason being that the CA is concerned with individuals' freedoms and opportunities to live the life they have reason to value. This approach also acknowledges human diversity and emphasises people as being agents in their lives to be who and what they want to be, and to reflect on the kind of life they want to live.

The role of HE institutions is, among other things, to foster open-mindedness through education (Robeyns, 2006). This would result in agency freedom that shapes what or who black women choose to be or do, regardless of challenges. Nussbaum (2004) argues that it is through education that other capabilities are expanded; for example, once a woman is educated, she is able to afford basic capabilities such as food, shelter and medical care. Many black women pursue doctoral studies with the aim to obtain a doctoral degree (functionings). However, due to multiple factors, a significant number of them drop out prematurely and do not achieve their goals ultimately. Using the CA will help to understand the possible major obstacles, or negative conversion factors, and to make recommendations in addressing this problem.

### **Research aim and research questions**

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies, noting both their positive and negative experiences in order to understand what HE

institutions need to do to attract and retain this target group until completion. The positive experiences refer to the capabilities that enable this group of women to continue and complete their doctoral studies, regardless of the challenges they encounter.

### **Research questions**

- In what ways are black women's experiences of doctoral studies shaped by gender?
- How does race shape their doctoral experiences?
- What capabilities enable them to strive for and reach what they value?
- What challenges and obstacles do they face in pursuing a doctoral degree?

This study is significant because, even though the results cannot be generalised to the larger population, it could bring to light the challenges that black women in doctoral studies encounter and recommend improvements to retain them until completion.

### **The importance of the study to the researcher**

Coming from a family where both parents are teachers (though my father retired early and went into business), I have been taught that "education is the key" and was encouraged to further my studies into HE. At the age of 17, I was a first-year student at the University of Lesotho, registered in the Faculty of Humanities, with Sociology and Development Studies as majors. I enjoyed Sociology and, after a break of almost 10 years, I registered and completed my honours in Sociology at the University of the Free State (UFS). During this break from formal education, I worked as a senior rehabilitation officer at the Lesotho Correctional Services, then later as a voluntary counselling and testing counsellor at Population Services International in Lesotho.

During my honours studies, I became conscious of the fact that black women are a minority in postgraduate studies, more so because I aspired to continue to master's and doctoral programmes. At honours level, I realised I was passionate about gender equality and women's and children's empowerment because society expects us to do certain things and behave a certain way, for example, taking "acceptable" feminised courses. I felt strongly that women who enjoyed and performed well in the natural sciences (which is seen as a more "masculine" field) should not be discriminated against on the basis of their gender, but be nurtured by HE institutions to be the people that they value to be.

It felt compelled to conduct this study, because I believe that both women and men have equal potential to be who they want to be and what they have reason to value, given equal opportunities particularly in education. As Dreze and Sen (1999) and Robeyns (2006) argue,



education gives all people a chance to see whether they could live a life better than that of their parents, because education enables people to be open-minded and liberated from custom and habit (Nussbaum, 2000). Higher education, however, does not only bring about individual achievement, but also wider contribution to society (Calhoun, 2006). Thus, collective importance refers to the fact that, once individuals are educated, they can have a positive impact on their families, societies, countries and the world, because they are able to expand their capabilities. Brennan and Naidoo (2008: 296) affirm this point by claiming that “higher education can extend wider benefits to those who do not directly participate in it.” These benefits include the development of new technologies and improved citizenship (Calhoun, 2006). Therefore, I strongly believe that black women, given equal opportunities, want to be educated and hold prestigious jobs and doctorates, even if only for the intrinsic value thereof. They are as capable as men and white women to aspire to be prominent people in society and take action in pursuing that which they aspire to be. It is also through education that discriminatory cultural norms can be abolished in the pursuit of social justice.

## **Value of the study**

### **Scholarship**

Not many studies have researched black women’s experiences within doctoral programmes using the CA. The current study can serve as motivation for more research and be the first of many published academic work on applying the CA to South African HE, particularly to black women undertaking doctoral studies.

### **Increasing the number of black women doctoral students in South Africa**

As previous studies have shown, many black women leave doctoral programmes before completion. Knowledge of the potential factors that contribute to this problem could aid HE institutions in providing greater support so as to retain these students until completion.

### **Improving policies in higher education**

The CA encloses all people in its aim to evaluate the well-being of individuals to ensure human development. Thus, exploring the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies at a South African university from a capabilities perspective could prove to be informative for policy makers. Recommendations on how HE institutions can attract and retain students from this group until completion can be made from this study, particularly for universities with similar contexts as the one in the study. This could lead to improvements in policies.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter reports on a detailed review of the literature on black women in doctoral studies. It commences by discussing how gender shapes societies, followed by a brief discussion on feminism, which is used to conceptualise gender in this study. This chapter further describes the situation of women in HE in general and women in HE in the South African context. It provides a South African historical background and explains relevant legislature. I then narrow down the discussion to women in doctoral studies, specifically in the South African context. The literature review contributes to the positioning of my study and argument.

### Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

Chapter 3 introduces the framework used to conduct this study. I will explain the terminology of the CA and discuss how this framework could be useful in exploring black women's experiences in doctoral studies.

### Chapter 4: Research methodology and methods

This chapter discusses the methodology and methods used in the study. I report on the sampling method that was used to select participants and indicate the ethical issues that were relevant to this research. I describe the pilot study that was conducted to enable me to refine the interview questions in order to obtain the information I required from this group of women.

### Chapter 5: Findings and discussion

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study and uses the CA to show how they were applied in analysing the data. I first provide biographies of all participants in order to paint a clear picture of them. This chapter also reports on the capabilities that the participants gained from embarking on their doctoral journeys (according to their view), as well as the challenges they experienced. These findings are discussed in relation to previous studies with the aim to identify the gaps within this target group through the CA's lens.

### Chapter 6: Conclusion and recommendations

In this chapter, a summary of the whole study is provided and recommendations are made. Also, the limitations of the research are set out.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

In order to enquire about the factors that help or stand in the way of black women who pursue doctoral degrees, this chapter reviews past and current international and national debates on this topic. The chapter starts with an overview of gender as a main factor which shapes society and how the social construction of gender influences men's and women's values and expectations. A historical depiction of feminism will be provided, followed by a discussion on women in HE in general, their access to HE, equity within HE, the role that race and gender play in HE, and sexual harassment which women continue to experience in HE institutions. The discussion will turn to South Africa's HE history and the laws that have been passed in order to redress the inequalities that black women in particular suffered during apartheid. I will then focus on the experiences of black women in doctoral studies specifically, both at international and national level. Lastly, I will link the literature review to the framework of my choice, the CA, stating clearly why I believe this is the most suitable approach to use in this study.

### **Gender as a main factor which shapes society**

Women worldwide have experienced some form of disadvantage and marginalisation due to patriarchy. According to Nussbaum & Glover (1995), women are rarely appointed to managerial positions or occupy positions of authority, because they have always been subordinate to men, be it within families or in the workplace. Gender has been the organising principle of society since the beginning of time (Cvikova, 2003). The minute a baby is born, people ask whether it is a boy or a girl. As Cvikova states, the baby has to be given a name and that name will be given according to gender in order to become a part of human society. She points out that girls and boys have different roles to play in society; hence, in most cultures boys are socialised differently from girls. For instance, women are assigned roles of child-rearing, while men are perceived as providers for their families. However, gender-role socialisation is a complex process which involves an individual's family experience, cultural conditioning and education. Socialisation processes do not only shape individuals' way of thinking and create social reality in this way, but also bring about male–female differences on every aspect of human experience, from modes of dress to social roles, which both males and females adhere to (Giddens, 1997). According to Ridgeway (2006), human interaction is determined by sex categorisation, which is labelling others as male or female. This categorisation is a fundamental cultural and cognitive tool that people use to structure human activity – how they relate to one another, be it in person, on paper, on the Internet, or in the imagination.

Gender is defined differently by different scholars of different schools of thought. Newman (1991: 61) refers to gender as “the social organisation of the relations between the sexes.” Its function is to differentiate the social meanings that are attributed to sexual differences from the sexual differences themselves. Scott (1986) describes gender as the knowledge that establishes meaning of bodily difference, while Connell (2002: 10) sees gender as “the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes.”

From the above definitions, it is evident that gender addresses the future direction of social development of a girl into womanhood and for a boy into manhood. Tosh (1994: 184) posits that girls are expected “to graduate to womanhood in mostly domestic settings under a mother’s supervision, while boys have to be prepared for competitive and demanding public arena.” Most women, unlike men, tend to be homemakers (Letuka, Mapetla & Matashane-Marite, 2004) and, according to Ragadu (2008), they are expected to be nurturers, loving and emotional beings. Women’s care-taking roles do not stop at the family, but extend to their communities, linking with Ubuntu which refers to “the essential unity of humanity and emphasises the importance of constantly referring to the principles of empathy, sharing and cooperation in our efforts to resolve our common problems” (Murithi, 2006: 25). This basically translates into being neighbourly and lending a helping hand to someone, which become the task of women according to socialisation. Magano (2013) and Carter et al. (2013) indicate that women assume multiple community engagements and more is expected of them than of males, concurring with Simone de Beauvoir (cited in Butler, 1986: 35) statement that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” This confirms that gender is socially constructed and an essential part of finding a place in society.

Gender cuts across all cultures, for instance, whether one is from a black or white community or whether one is rich or poor, educated or not, the common factor to these communities is the fact that they consist of males and females. Ridgeway (as cited in Feinstein, 2012) argues that primary categories such as those of gender enable social relations to occur within new social contexts and among strangers because they provide a foundation from which to understand information about the person and the interaction. According to Feinstein (2012), the fundamental knowledge that is shared by all members of society allows for the coordination of social interactions. This knowledge, which is instilled during socialisation, allows people to act in a certain way towards others based on assumptions about how others will perceive their actions. Individuals define themselves in relation to others in order to understand the situation and act appropriately (Ridgeway, 2006). Consequently, gender is a primary organising principle of society as both males and

females react differently to issues and have different needs and, at times, different capabilities. This confirms the claim of feminist theories that gender is culturally constructed and the cultural interpretation of sex (Butler, 1990).

### **Feminism**

Feminism refers to a movement against sexism, women's exploitation and oppression and is inclusive of everyone who wants to partake (hooks, 2000: 1). Cleage (cited in Collins, 1996: 12) defines feminism as "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic." Feminist history has been understood in terms of three distinct stages or generations, namely the first, second and third wave (Gillis, Howie & Munford, 2007).

The first women's movement in Britain and the USA is termed the "first wave of feminism" or "liberal feminism". Activists in this era focused on gaining women's suffrage, the right to be educated and better working conditions (Sorensen & Krolokke, 2006). First-wave feminism emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, with Mary Wollstonecraft, Susan B Anthony, Lucy Stone, Olympia Brown and Helen Pitts as the major feminist role-players. Whelehan (1995) and Evans (1997) state that Wollstonecraft's publication *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 contributed to the approval of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution which protected women's right to vote. (The right to vote had already been afforded to poor white and black men, but had been regularly denied to women.)

According to Whelehan (1995), the first wave was victorious in so far as it achieved the goal of empowering white women within the political and legal system and, thus, facilitated the possibility of future reform of the most inequitable aspects of social life. The first wave was a symbol of the beginning of a mass movement and it resulted in calls for collective action in the fight for women's equality by awareness raising and reformist campaigning. However, the struggle continued into the second and third waves.

The second wave developed during the wake of World War II, a time when many women began entering the workforce. According to Whelehan (1995: 4), women's participation was limited to "menial and feminine tasks" such as typing and clerical or domestic support work. During the second wave, women's issues such as reproduction, mothering, sexual violence against women, expression of sexuality and domestic labour became the focus (Gillis et al., 2007). Even though the second wave paid attention to women's legal rights similar to the first wave, greater emphasis was placed on expanding women's liberation (Kinser, 2004). It is in this wave that the motto "the political is personal" (Butler, 1986: 36) was heard; women challenged their exclusion from the public world of politics and economics, while

reintroducing the personal experience of being female into daily politics. However, it was through this motto that women of colour felt they were being marginalised as they experienced isolation from both the black male and white female activists (Taylor, 1998) – which gave birth to the third wave. Mann and Huffman (2005) argue that women from different worlds (different races) could not form a movement together because they did not know one another. By this they mean that the life journeys of both black and white women are different; they are from different backgrounds and are affected differently by the same factors; hence, both cannot relate easily to one another. Black women also identified with black men's oppression in white-dominated societies.

Women in Africa joined the protest during the third wave. Feminism has always been seen as a Western concept, but African women have redefined and are still redefining it to suit the African context (Mangena, 2003). Berger (2008) purports that the majority of women activists in Africa did not consider themselves to be feminists due to the origin of the concept. The third wave emerged in the 1980s as a result of discussions and writings on the intersections of feminism and racism. According to Mann and Huffman (2005), the third wave is a discourse for understanding and framing gender relations and is a response to the failure of the second wave to recognise and appreciate the differences among women. The second wave was critiqued for its pretence of "sisterhood;" in other words, for assuming that all women have a homogeneous experience (Butler, 1986: 38), which has never truly been the case for black and white women (Mann & Huffman, 2005).

While women of colour and different ethnicities were activists in the first and second waves, they pioneered the third wave inspired by the belief that the second wave did not represent their needs. They argued that white women still oppressed them even though they were all women and fighting for liberation (King 1988). The third wave focused on investigating forms of oppression and discrimination that women of colour and different ethnicities experienced internally, other than addressing external forms only. In simple terms, third-wave feminism is generally a label for feminists of the generation following the Women's Liberation Movement (the second wave) and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1997 in USA. Like the second wave, the third wave is not a uniform perspective, but includes a number of diverse and analytically distinct approaches to feminism.

Collins (1990: 555) refers to the multi-dimensional inequality of black women as the "matrix domination." This is a sociological paradigm that explains issues of oppression on grounds of race, class and gender which, though recognised as different social classifications, are all interconnected. Other forms of classification, such as sexual orientation, religion or age, apply to this theory as well. One might experience domination in many ways, facing many

different challenges in which one obstacle, such as race, could overlap with other sociological features. Black women experience different sets of social practices which intersect to create oppression. By this, Collins means that no two black women experience the exact same oppression but, because all American black women share intersecting oppressions, they can build a collective standpoint.

In summary, women fought for equal rights to engage in legal, political, educational and social spheres through the successive waves of feminism. On the other hand, African women felt isolated from the feminist movement and developed their own version of feminism based on intersectional discrimination. Feminists succeeded in their fight for women's inclusion in HE because it was after the 19<sup>th</sup> century that women began to access HE institutions.

I now turn to an overview of women in HE and to black women undertaking doctoral studies specifically, both in the international and South African context.

### **Women in higher education**

As mentioned above, there has been a struggle in balancing women's participation in the private and public spheres (Bradley, 2000). After the first wave of feminism, women in certain countries were able to participate or enrol in HE institutions, the "space that is traditionally seen as male" according to Quinn (2003: 450), or as Mackinnon, Elqvist-Saltzman, and Prentice (1998) describe, "dangerous terrain for women." Since then, the vital role that HE plays in the promotion of economic development has been recognised increasingly (Oketch, McCowan & Schendel, 2014) and governments worldwide are increasing funding in order to support scientific academic research (Herman, 2011b; Salmi, 2009; West & Gokalp, 2011). Consequently, the number of students enrolled in HE institutions in the past few decades has grown tremendously (McCowan, 2007).

As indicated by several scholars (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Lynch, 2008; McCowan, 2007), access and success through HE have been a worldwide concern for universities. Student access and success are affected by the political and social context in which universities perform and, most importantly, by the historical background of the university. Higher education is acknowledged as a public good, because individuals' participation benefits the individual as well as society at large (Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009; Walker & Boni, 2013). However, access to HE has not always been possible for all, which can be ascribed to social, emotional and economic challenges (Haake, 2011; McCowan, 2007).

According to Johnson-Bailey (2004: 332), studies conducted in the USA indicate that the "experiences of women and blacks in higher education are different because of the

interlocking nature of their race and gender.” Furthermore, the subject of black women in HE has been ignored in educational studies (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Strauss (2001) argues that many postgraduates have many responsibilities alongside their studies, which put a strain on their academic progress. For example, several studies point to one factor that contributes immensely to the attrition of female graduate students in the USA, namely motherhood (Lynch, 2008). In the same vein, Acker and Armenti (2004) conducted a study in Canada on issues regarding children and career and found that fatigue and stress shape the daily lives of women in academia. Participants stated that, in order to survive in academia, one has to work hard and sleep less. Although education is perceived to be the best instrument to achieve equality among diverse social groups, more specifically between women and men, studies focusing on women in general are scarce (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Stromquist, 2006).

Another challenge that women are facing in HE institutions is sexual harassment. As Larsson, Hensing and Allebeck (2003) explain, sexual harassment is a problem within education at all levels. According to Park, Park, Lee and Moon (2013), female students could experience sexual harassment while having social interaction with their male colleagues. Many educated women do experience sexual harassment and violence before completing their degrees (Kabeer, 2005). Kelderman (2014) mentions that new laws and guidelines regarding sexual harassment have been implemented in colleges in the USA, which is a starting point to addressing this issue. For example, colleges hire staff members to investigate sexual assault and recommend ways to resolve this concern.

Because the culture within HE institutions is often described as chauvinistic, cold and competitive – thus, a hindrance to attracting and retaining black staff and students (Ismail, 2011: 277) – women often find it difficult to blend into HE, particularly in predominantly white male disciplines (Haake, 2011; Kurtz-Costes, Helmke & Ulku-Steiner, 2006). The fact that institutional culture puts women at a disadvantage often makes them feel the need to prove their abilities and worthiness by working much harder (Moyer, Salovey & Casey-Cannon, 1999). Nevertheless, many psychological theories have shown that people look up to individuals who share the same personal traits such as race and sex; hence, women, and particularly black women, in HE could be motivated to study when they see lecturers whom they could identify with (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Moyer et al., 1999). Regardless of these negative factors that women experience in HE, their numbers in HE has increased globally, from 8% to 28%, from 1970 to 2009 (UNESCO, 2012).

Turning to the South African context, black people in HE constituted 40%, while white people constituted 48% and other racial groups constituted 12% in 2013. In comparison with the



South Africa population where 77% are black and 11% are white, this is an uneven distribution (Higher Education South Africa, 2014). Due to the new legislations that were passed (which will be discussed at a later stage) to ensure equality in HE, black women's access has increased. This is evidenced by the fact that the participation in relation to a broader population for black students (men and women) has increased from 9% to 14% (between 1993 and 2011). Although there has been an increase in black people within HE, this increase is still relatively low in comparison with the South African population. According to Herman (2011), HE institutions and governments are working together towards improving the knowledge systems within institutions through increasing the number of postgraduates. Of the 160 000 or more HE graduates in South Africa in 2011, only around 1 500 were doctoral students, of which less than half were women (DHET, 2013).

Despite obstacles that they face in HE, some women continue their studies, inspired by their personal goals (Maher, Ford & Thompson, 2004). Support, from both the family and the departments in which the women are registered, is another factor that contributes to their completing their studies. Funding plays a further role in enabling women to persist against the odds (Maher et al., 2004).

Worldwide, governments and HE institutions are endeavouring to increase the number of black women in HE (Bitzer, Albertyn, Frick, Grant & Kelly, 2013). To establish this in the South African context specifically, concepts such as "equity" and "diversity" are included in legislation (DHET, 2013; Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill, 2013 (MWCPD, 2013)) with the intent to redress the inequalities that occurred during the apartheid era (Cassim, 2005: 653).

### **South African historical background and legislation**

The apartheid system created inequalities by means of racist policies (Ocampo, 2004). As Ocampo illustrates, the Bantu Education Act of 1952 ensured that African people were offered education that would restrict them to being manual labourers or lower-status civil servants and professionals. Thus, black people were, in the words of Bunting (2006, 45), "trained to be useful to apartheid" and, by receiving this low-quality education, they, in effect, were upholding the apartheid socio-political agenda that purposed to keep them subordinate, powerless and voiceless. The former Constitution in the Republic of South Africa stipulated that HE institutions were divided in four racial groups: African, coloured, Indian and white (Bunting, 2006). This gave rise to historically black (which included coloured and Indian people) and historically white universities (restricted to white students). Black students were allowed to register at a white institution provided that they are granted a permit indicating that their proposed programme of study was not available at any institution

designated for their racial group. Moreover, those few who were granted the opportunity to study at these universities had to push the mandate of the ruling party. This discrimination went as far as, for example, health settings; apartheid policies excluded black students from training in health professions (London, Kalula & Xaba, 2009). It is of great importance that I mention that although the university in which I conducted this research was historically a white university, it has transformed to a university that provides education for all despite their race. However, not denying that there are still incidents whereby black students and staff experience discriminatory acts from the whites. According to the Soudien report (2008), racism - systematic, institutional, interpersonal and personal racism is still a problem within universities.

Women in academic careers suffered under the strong gender-role stereotypes that were upheld by the patriarchal and apartheid ideologies of the apartheid era (Prozesky, 2008). After democratisation, a fair and comprehensive legislation and policy framework was put in place to enable equity and diversity in relation to transformation in HE institutions. Such legislation includes the Constitution (1996), the White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (DHET, 2013), the Higher Education White Paper (1997), and the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (2013) (MWCPD, 2013).

The South African Higher Education White Paper (1997) declares the Ministry of Education's commitment to changing the composition of the student body by means of redistributing public subsidy for HE. Public funding is to be used to support students academically, that is to increase the number of disadvantaged students within HE. This is particularly important for black women as they fall under the group of marginalised citizens. The revised version of this paper (DHET, 2013) states that the policies that have been formulated to improve access for black people and women in particular seem to have been effective thus far. In 1994, the number of black students in HE was 43%, however, it is not indicated how many black women were included. This Paper further states that, while progression to university is the focus – as it is socially just to fight inequalities on race, gender and disabilities, for example – improving the quality of education is also a major concern. Since women have been and are still a marginalised group, the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill is in place to improve the lives of all women, and mostly black women, as they have experienced more discrimination as their white counterparts. As stipulated in Chapter 2, section 4(1a), this Bill is in agreement with international laws that address the existing patriarchal attitudes and effects of apartheid on women's experience within education systems. Chapter 3, section 7(1c) stipulates that legislation must develop support mechanisms for women in decision making. In other words, women should be heard or their voices should be listened to in either discussions or meetings and their views must not be

overruled by virtue of their gender. Furthermore, this Bill stipulates that no woman should withdraw from her studies as a result of family responsibilities' not allowing her to continue her studies.

It is evident from the above discussion that women worldwide have similar experiences in some regards. However, due to the intersections between gender and race, black women's experiences might entail additional complexities in their pursuit of HE degrees, specifically black women undertaking doctoral studies, as the attrition rate for this group is still relatively high compared with that of white women and men in general.

### **Women in doctoral studies**

Women in doctoral studies have been researched by several scholars worldwide (Carter et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2000; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006); however, not many studies have been conducted specifically on black women in doctoral studies. All the demands that society places on women often have a negative effect on women's performance in academia. Men tend to dominate the academic scene in large numbers, because they rarely are restricted by family responsibilities (Bair & Haworth, 2004). According to Johnson-Bailey (2004), although the number of women in graduate programmes has grown, their paths in HE are still affected negatively by family responsibilities. However, as Carter et al. (2013: 339) state regarding women in general in New Zealand HE, "doctoral attrition is under scrutiny. Relatively few fail doctorates once they submit a thesis, yet the literature testifies to doctoral attrition as high as 50%." Doctoral attrition rates are also a cause for concern worldwide. Herman (2011b) indicates that there is more than 50% doctoral attrition rate in the USA, whereas the general women's attrition rate for graduate student mothers is still on the rise (Brown & Watson, 2010; Lynch, 2008). Unfortunately, there are no statistics in this regard that pertain to black women specifically.

Leonard, Becker and Coate (2005) investigated the factors that motivate male and female students to pursue doctoral studies and the benefits of doctoral studies in the UK. Their findings included reasons such as pursuing the degree for the intrinsic value, which is for the sake of having a PhD, and benefits such as acquiring research skills. The other reason for students to embark on a doctoral journey is to be exposed to and have access to other academics (Bazeley, Kemp, Steven, Asmar, Grbich, Marsh & Bhathal, 1996). In their study, Brown and Watson (2010) attempted to gain understanding of the experiences of female doctoral students by means of exploring participants' experiences as doctoral students and uncovering the feelings that emerged throughout their doctoral journey. Most participants stated that having a PhD was required for their career progression and that it widened their choices so as not to be restricted to a certain kind of job.

Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) conducted a study in the USA on the role of gender in PhD academic experiences. They found that female students perceived their male supervisors to be excluding them from informal discussions that affected them and that they did not regard their opinions as of any value. The authors further indicated that “women doctoral students who had female role models reported higher levels of self-esteem, instrumentality, work commitment and career aspirations than women with male faculty role models” (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006: 139), the reason being that women felt excluded by male supervisors and neglected by their male colleagues. As such, black women, particularly in predominantly white male-dominated fields, often feel discriminated against most notably because of their gender (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006). Therefore, high female attrition from doctoral studies might, to a certain extent, be explained by these academic cultures which provide fewer opportunities for women as for men – pointing to a need for cultural change (Haake, 2011). In this regard, Brennan and Naidoo (2008) posit that HE institutions must show concern for gender and equality among both the staff and students and seek ways to enhance these factors to enable students’ progress. Deem and Brehony’s (2000) study on the experiences of social science research students (both men and women) in two universities in the UK found that research supervision has to be regarded as a way of teaching whereby the supervisor mentors the student and not as an activity which is private between two consenting adults.

In summary, black women experiences have been found to be similar to women of other races in some regards. However, the difference is seen in experiences of black women who are in the predominantly white male-dominated fields because this category of women feels they are not treated equally to their male counterparts as well as their white female colleagues. For example, their inputs are not recognised or taken seriously as those from their male colleagues and white female colleagues.

The focus will now shift from women in doctoral studies globally to women in doctoral studies in the South African context.

### **Women in doctoral studies in the South African context**

In South Africa in 2005, 29% of doctoral graduates were black (Centre for Research on Science and Technology, 2009). In 2010, 42% of doctoral graduates were female, though it is not evident how many of them were black women (CHE, 2010: online). Furthermore, black African doctoral graduates constituted 32% of all graduates in 2007, but still it is not shown how many of them were female. Previous studies have shown that many black women leave doctoral programmes before completion (Brown & Watson, 2010; Herman, 2011; Magano, 2011).

In 2012, however, specific statistics were indicated for black women, namely that they constituted 16.4% of all doctoral enrolments (DHET, 2014). While this number has increased from 7.5% in 2000, this does not mean that all students will complete, given the high drop-out rate for this specific group. It is essential to note that currently black women constitute 34.9% of all women in doctoral studies and that, of all female doctoral students, black women constitute 37.6%. The drop-out rate in HE in South Africa for all doctoral students, for both women and men, is 20% and the main reasons are bad supervision, a lack of support and insufficient funds (Magano, 2011). Postgraduate education requires resilience due to the many obstacles that students encounter, which are often social, emotional and intellectual isolation (Magano, 2011).

Similar to research conducted internationally, studies in South Africa indicate that women are likely to drop out of doctoral studies more prematurely than men. According to Prozesky (2008), women postpone enrolling for doctoral studies due to family responsibilities. For example, they choose to support their husbands in achieving their goals or to wait for their children to grow up and be less dependent on them. Ahern and Manathunga (2004) concur by saying that, in most cases, black women who are mothers and are pursuing their academic dream, often drop out. According to Springer, Parker and Leviten-Reid (2009), women who find themselves trying to balance academic work and motherhood often struggle and sometimes fail. Studies conducted in South Africa by Magano (2011; 2013) and Managa (2013) found that access and success of students within HE is a great concern. Magano's study on the social and emotional challenges faced by female postgraduate in South Africa reports that women's access and success are influenced negatively by the combination of studies and family responsibilities. Bitzer (2007, as cited in Magano, 2011) purports that students become more demotivated when their research does not seem to be progressing. This could be caused by various factors such as constant change of topics or a lack of communication with the supervisor. Bitzer also notes that supervision plays a major role in student progress. As mentioned previously, Pillay (2009: 501) claims that balancing two lives brings about limitations for "academic mothers." This, Pillay asserts, is a result of the fact that women are traditionally associated with nurturing, love and emotion, while being an academic is traditionally associated with reason and logic. In her study, she argues that motherhood needs to be seen as intellectual work if the academic mother were to be complete or have wholeness of self; she claims that "mothering requires constant and complex forms of thinking" (Pillay, 2009: 505). She highlights that academic mothers live their lives in two separate worlds, which leads to their not enjoying either world in most cases. Thus, some married women could end relationships with their spouses as a result of not having time for their families (Brown & Watson, 2010). The dual role that women play in

comparison with men clearly puts them at a disadvantage. However, inequalities in academia are perpetuated by a lack of an enabling environment, which hinders women's progress and maintains cultural barriers (Managa, 2013).

According to societal expectations, a mother is a good mother when she takes care of her children; consequently, the notion of a "good woman" governs a woman's allocation of her time and effort (Carter et al., 2013: 341). Pillay continues to say that the work culture expects women to be academics while at work and not mothers, while at home they should be mothers and not academics. However, this conflict burdens women who in any case are academics and women in order to be whole, both cultures of mothering and academia place harsh demands on one's body (Springer et al., 2009). Furthermore, society expects women to put their families first, and their own needs, dreams and ambitions second (Magano, 2013). Valian (2005) concurs to some extent as she states that there needs to be a belief system that advocates gender equality and understands the nurturing aspect of women in order for more men to develop nurturing characteristics.

Another stressor that doctoral students experience is competition for financial assistance, which strains relationships and cooperation among students which could otherwise have been a great source of support (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006). Furthermore, the three-year duration of National Research Foundation (NRF) funding in South African universities often forces students to take up jobs, which many times leads to a change in their career goals and, ultimately, discontinuation of doctoral programmes (Herman, 2011a).

After the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, equity in HE became and still is a concern. Scholars such as Mafumo (2011) suggest that, in order to redress issues of equity, HE institutions and educators in South Africa must be committed to giving students equal time and attention and support the previously disadvantaged. Herman (2014, 49) agrees by advocating proper and quality education for black women and not simply completion of their doctorates without coming to be of any value to the country. She states, "it is better to have a few good PhDs than many mediocre graduates" and argues that "growth without quality defeats the purpose of expansion" (Herman, 2014: 39). The development of a fully-fledged citizen entails not only participation, access and success, but also quality, efficiency, competence and knowledge (Mafumo, 2011). Although South Africa has increased the number of doctoral graduates since democracy (NRF, 2007), it is a point of concern, however, to see that as much as there is increase in black doctoral students specifically, the representation of non-South Africans is highest among black graduates (DHET, 2013).

The studies conducted on black women's experiences in HE indicate that women with families share the same experiences in general. However, black women have the added

experience of being the group that has suffered the most discrimination and inequality in the world.

### **How to attract and retain doctoral students in South Africa**

During apartheid specifically, “intellectual discourse, teaching and learning, curriculum and texts, and knowledge production and research were strongly affected by racist, patriarchal and authoritarian apartheid social order” (Badat, 2009: 457). Johnson-Bailey (2004: 332) adds that “studies have shown that the experiences of women and blacks in higher education are different because of the interlocking nature of their race and gender.”

The National Development Plan (NPC, 2011) intends to increase the number of doctoral graduates, which is less than 2 000-5 000 per year in South Africa, threefold by 2030. They plan to achieve this by means of initiatives that encourage students to study beyond their national borders, such as the Cooperation on Doctoral Education between Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe (CODOC), as well as funding initiatives such as the NRF (Magano, 2011). As mentioned previously, existing legislation is often not implemented (UNESCO, 2007) due to inadequate resources, a lack of skills and the know-how to implement policy, a lack of public demand, and low levels of information. For instance, although the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (2013) stipulates that no woman should be forced to drop out of higher education as a result of family responsibilities, they still do due to the struggle of balancing academic life and family life.

In the South African context, it is evident that supervisors need to be aware of how they interact with students, because when students feel they are being dominated, their performance decline – this is because power can damage and affect students’ progress (Magano, 2011). Furthermore, departmental climate contributes greatly to student progress, for instance, peer support has been identified as a major contributor to student success (West & Gokalp, 2011). Strategies such as shifting from a traditional PhD model to including coursework, establishing graduate schools and internationalising the PhD can improve the retention of students (Herman, 2011a). Managa (2013) conducted a study in South Africa on how women experience both academic life and work life. She interviewed 46 women; some had their doctoral degrees, while others were still pursuing their studies. Most participants stated that one can succeed in doctoral studies when one has identified studying as a priority. Also, support from the family and the institution enabled some women to complete their doctoral studies.

In her study on whether expanding doctoral education in South Africa could be realised, Herman (2011a) stated that the removal of barriers such as insufficient funding and limited supervisory capacity are matters that HE institutions and the government need to work on in

order to retain students until completion. Strydom and Mentz (2010) concur by saying that South Africa, similar to international countries, lacks expertise because students enrol in high numbers while academic staff is not increasing at the same rate. It is not surprising, thus, that academics find it difficult to attend to all students and have insufficient time for “adequate skills transfer” (Bitzer et al., 2014). The latter is a crucial part of education it is known that doctoral programmes should develop future scholars who will continue to contribute to the knowledge system, which is essential for professional careers needed worldwide (Holley & Gardner, 2012).

## Conclusion

This chapter reviewed past and current debates on the experiences of women in HE, particularly those of black women. The literature shows that black and white women’s general experience of HE, particularly doctoral studies, is very similar. However, a significant difference is evident for black women, because they are not disadvantaged on grounds of their gender only, but also on their race. As a result, I found the CA to be a suitable framework for this study because this approach is a framework that evaluates and assesses individual well-being, taking into consideration the social arrangements that foster or hinder that well-being (Sen, 1999). This framework does not only look at the individual’s functionings, their doings and beings, but also looks at the freedoms and opportunities an individual has to achieve their desired functionings. The CA is an individualist approach; as a result it takes into each person in normative judgement (Robeyns, 2003). It therefore does not assume that people have the same functions, and this means it allows human diversity. For example people come from different backgrounds irrespective of the fact that they are women and black, it focuses on freedoms and agency that each woman (in this study) has. Much research has been conducted on women in academia though not much has been done on experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies; therefore it is through the lens of capabilities approach that I explore the experiences of these women.



## CHAPTER 3: THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH

### Introduction

In this chapter, I systematically introduce the CA through Amartya Sen's view and differentiate between his work and that of Martha Nussbaum. I discuss development as capability expansion, which I will link to agency, one of the key concepts in the CA. Since my study explores the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies, I will discuss the CA in relation to education. This will be followed by a discussion on the CA and gender, also in the context of education, for education is seen as a way to liberate disadvantaged groups which, in this case, are black women.

### A description of the capabilities approach

This approach was first introduced by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (1992; 1993; 1999). He proposed it as an alternative to utilitarian and neo-liberal approaches to development with the aim to measure well-being. Sen argues that these approaches only focus on the economic aspect of life to define well-being, instead of focusing on individuals' lives as a whole. The CA, therefore, originated as a result of as Sen's criticism of utilitarian welfare economics which, according to him, does not provide sufficient arguments to evaluate the institutional arrangements of a society. His idea gave birth to the human development approach and its practical application, the Human Development Index (HDI) pioneered by Mahbub ul Haq and used in development studies to compare relative human development levels between countries, among other things. Human development disputes a definition of development solely by following approaches that focus only on income as measured by Gross National Product (GNP). Instead, it "aims to enlarge people's freedoms to do and be what they value and have reason to value" (Alkire, 2010: 43).

The CA is a normative framework that is used mainly to evaluate and assess individual well-being, taking into consideration the social arrangements that foster or hinder that well-being, and the design of policies and proposals for social change within societies (Robeyns, 2006). It is, however, essential to mention that the CA is not a theory of social justice, or of justice in general (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). The CA has become popular in academia and policy making because it evaluates individual or group well-being and considers issues such as poverty and inequality (Robeyns, 2006). Sen (1992; 1993) argues that increased income should be seen as a means to improve people's welfare because income is a resource that only creates opportunities in life instead of being an end in itself.

The CA has been built on and applied by scholars such as Martha Nussbaum (2000; 2003), and some specifically applied the framework in areas of gender equality, education and social justice (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2005; Unterhalter, 2007; Walker, 2006). The CA

uses core concepts (functionings, capabilities, agency, well-being and conversion factors) to explain the alternative framework that assesses and evaluates human development (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1999). Functionings refer to the achieved outcomes or “doings” and “beings” that a person has reason to value (Robeyns, 2003). For example, in this study, obtaining doctoral degrees is a valued functioning for black women undertaking doctoral studies; however, the realisation of this desired outcome depends on the real opportunities these women have to acquire education and contribute to their development and well-being. Capabilities, on the other hand, refer to the opportunities and freedoms that people have to realise valuable functionings, the opportunity to choose who and what they want to be (opportunity freedom) or “what people are actually able to be and do rather than what resources they have access to” (Walker, 2005: 103).

The CA relates the evaluation of the quality of life to the assessment of the capability to function (Sen, 1999). In other words, it is critical to have not only opportunities, but also the freedom to have and be what one values, to have effective opportunities to undertake the actions that people want to engage in, and to be who they want to be (Sen 1985, cited in Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). In this regard, Walker (2005: 104) explains that the CA is based on “reason to value,” which means it is essential for people to make an informed decision on living the life they value. As such, the CA emphasises the freedoms that individuals have in choosing to be what they value, which stem from an environment that is conducive to human flourishing and focusing on quality of life holistically and not just on the economic achievement.

Another important concept used in the CA is “agency,” which is the ability of a person to act in pursuit of desired functionings or goals (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). It means acting to bring about change in one’s life and acting upon achieving that which one values (Walker, 2005). The CA emphasises the importance of having freedom and opportunity to choose. Sen (1999: 19) elaborates that an agent is a person who “acts and brings about change” and “whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well.” Agency is significant particularly because, regardless of the opportunities, an individual has to take initiative in order to convert available opportunities or capabilities into valued functionings.

According to Sen (1999: 502), “development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom.” This implies that deprivation of freedom is a result of authoritative governance. He argues that people should have political and civil liberties. Thus, development strategies and policies should be put into place from which a capability-oriented social policy could be formulated. The latter policy needs to ensure security and inclusion for all in the participation

of economic, social and cultural life. Capabilities might be available to a person, but equally important is the agency to achieve the valued outcomes. Well-being and agency are interrelated and each has two dimensions, namely freedom and achievement (capabilities and functionings). The CA differs from other approaches in that it assesses the wellness of an individual's state of being (Sen, 1993). For instance, it focuses on whether people are able to be educated and asks whether the resources required for this capability are available. This difference brings us to another essential concept in CA, namely "well-being."

Although this approach evaluates and assesses poverty, inequality and well-being, it does not purport to be a solution to these social ills. Instead, it provides a tool and a framework within which these phenomena could be conceptualised and evaluated. Because it is not considered a theory as such, the CA cannot provide adequate explanations on issues of policy and social change; consequently, it requires additional explanatory theories (Robeyns, 2005). Sen (as cited in Robeyns, 2005) argues that evaluations and policies should focus on what people are able to do and be and on the quality of their lives by providing a conducive environment to ensure that they have more freedom to live the kind of life they have reason to value. A person does not only have to value a certain lifestyle, but she has to scrutinise the motives as to why she values this lifestyle (Robeyns, 2003). In this regard, the CA covers most aspects of human well-being. It does not evaluate exclusively in monetary terms, but also identifies social constraints that influence and restrict both well-being and the evaluative exercises. As Walker (2005: 104) explains, this approach "argues for well-being and quality of life, not only income generation." The emphasis is not on the financial wealth that one possesses, but on how money as a resource creates opportunities by being a means to an end and not an end in itself.

In order to obtain the desired outcomes, there has to be opportunities and freedoms to choose, which are dependent on personal factors, the institutional environment and the social backgrounds of the students. For this reason, it is not sufficient to have knowledge of the goods that a person possesses or could use to achieve certain functionings – it is essential in the CA to know much more about the person's background and the circumstances in which she is living, as well as the factors which influence her beings and doings (Robeyns, 2005). Individuals must be able or be enabled to live the life they have reason to choose. According to Robeyns (2005) and Crocker and Robeyns (2010), the realisation of functionings is influenced by three groups of conversion factors, namely personal, social and environmental.

### **Personal conversion factors**

These are factors within a person such as the metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skill, intelligence.

### **Social conversion factors**

These are factors in society such as public policies, social norms, gender roles, power relations and societal hierarchies. An example from the current study is the influence of patriarchy on the lived experiences and socialisation of black women in doctoral studies. As indicated in the previous chapter, women sometimes feel that male supervisors do not understand them and, thus, prefer having a female supervisor. Research conducted by scholars such as Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) and Moyer et al. (1999) show that performance improves when the student has a role model from a similar background.

### **Environmental conversion factors**

These factors result from the environment in which the individual lives, works or, in this case, studies, for instance, the climate of the region in which one lives, as well as the geographical location, be it rural, urban, or whether one stays in an environment prone to earthquakes. The institutional culture and infrastructure especially in predominantly male-dominated fields (for example, equipment used in physics laboratories) are built in such a way that physical strength is required. This might impair women within these fields because they usually have less physical strength and often have to rely on their male counterparts for assistance.

Since it considers conversion factors, the CA accounts for the interpersonal variations when it comes to converting capabilities into functionings. For example, people might have the same resources, but they have different backgrounds which could have an impact on their capability to convert these resources into desired outcomes. Sen (1992: 19) illustrates this by using an example of a bicycle: people might not be interested in a bicycle due to its shape, but maybe because it can take us places and enhance our mobility. He explains further that a bicycle will be useful to the person who knows how to ride it (personal conversion factor with regard to skill and being physically capable of riding), but not useful to the one who cannot ride it. In relation to my study, two black women undertaking doctoral studies could perform differently in their studies due to different family backgrounds. For instance, they could both be on a scholarship, but one might have family responsibilities while the other one does not have a family to support.

The CA has been expanded in a slightly different direction by Martha Nussbaum (2000; 2011). I now turn to the differences between their two views.

## **Differences between Sen's and Nussbaum's view of the capabilities approach**

Both Sen and Nussbaum are prominent scholars in the CA; however, their approach differs according to their different goals and personal intellectual histories. Nussbaum (2000) is influenced by her background as a moral-legal-political philosopher. Nussbaum and Sen's views are similar to some extent, but differ at a point where Nussbaum draws a list of 10 central capabilities for basic human dignity, or entitlements, that all humans should have, which she feels should be incorporated within government constitutions: 1. Life, 2. Bodily health, 3. Bodily integrity, 4. Senses, imagination and thought, 5. Emotions, 6. Practical reason, 7. Affiliation, 8. Other species, 9. Play, and 10. Control over one's environment. Sen (2004) disagrees with the endorsement of a list, arguing that people should come up with a list of reasoned functionings and capabilities, through public dialogue, which are relevant to specific communities or societies instead of having a list imposed on them. Sen argues that people should be given the freedom to choose what is important to them and not be told what they need for their lives.

As a philosopher, Nussbaum bases her work, which is primarily narrative in nature, on people's traditions and cultures. It tries to understand people's hopes, desires, aspirations, motivations and decisions (Robeyns, 2005). Nussbaum's capabilities focus more on "people's skills and personal traits as aspects of capabilities" (Robeyns, 2005: 104). On the other hand, Sen, as an economist, focuses on inequality and poverty. He criticises literature that measures welfare through income and advocates a focus on the real freedoms that people have to lead the lives they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2003).

It is important to note that there might be more differences between these prominent scholars; however, I selected only those that I found relevant to this study. For my study, I used the capability version of Amartya Sen, whereas Nussbaum's contribution will be acknowledged when necessary.

## **Development as capability expansion**

Successful development goes beyond the expansion of real income and economic growth. A high GNP does not always mean that the citizens enjoy good welfare in that country; there might be citizens who are living below the poverty line, experiencing premature mortality, high illiteracy and malnutrition. As mentioned previously, in the CA, it is essential to examine the functionings and the capability that people have to achieve what they value or what they want to be (Sen, 2004). Capabilities bring about a person's freedom to choose between different ways of living.

Development is defined by Sen (1999: 1) as a “process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.” These freedoms are determined by social and economic arrangements such as educational and health care facilities, and by political and civil rights, which might be the freedom for an individual to choose to participate in public discussion. Freedom is, therefore, central to development (Sen, 1999). However, poverty and poor access to economic opportunities, among other things, are barriers to development.

According to Sen (1999), freedom plays two roles in development: an evaluative role and a social effectiveness role. The evaluative role refers to assessing whether the freedoms that people have are being enhanced. This is because having greater freedom to do things people value may enable them to achieve their valued functionings. The social effectiveness role, on the other hand, pertains to the fact that development is achieved solely by the action of citizens; therefore, people have to help themselves to fight for a life that is dignified and fully human and so influence the world to achieve positive change in people's lives. In this sense, the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, creative, healthy lives and to have the freedom to do and be what they value.

In summary, the highlighted characteristics of the CA focus on the plural aspects of well-being. It differentiates clearly between means and ends, and between substantive freedoms (capabilities) and outcomes (functionings). For example, resources are only the means to achieving desired outcomes, not the end, and they could enable the achievement of desired functionings. The CA on its own does not provide a solution to research on development, poverty, justice and social policies, but provides an important framework for such analysis, more especially when it borrows from other theories (Robeyns, 2005).

Nevertheless, the realisation of functionings requires more than merely the opportunities and freedoms that individuals have. Individuals need to exercise agency in order to change their lives to ones they have reason to value. As a result, the CA and agency will be discussed below.

### **Capabilities approach and agency**

As indicated, agency implies the conversion of capabilities into valued functionings. However, two people with the same opportunities and freedoms are likely to end up with different types and levels of achieved functionings as a result of different choices according to their different ideas of well-being. The CA encompasses this difference because it respects people's different ideas of well-being (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). It also considers the fact that a person shapes her own destiny by being an active participant in change instead of being a passive and docile recipient of instruction or of dispensed assistance. Agency has four dimensions, which are discussed below.

### **The four dimensions of agency**

According to Crocker and Robeyns (2010), self-determination is the first dimension of agency. It means that an individual as an agent in her life has to be determined to act in order to attain the goals she has reason to value. The second dimension is reason orientation and deliberation, which implies that an individual does not act on impulse, but rather critically assesses opportunities available and becomes active agent towards achieving the desired goal. Thus, it is important not only to have freedom or power to act, but also to make the informed decision to pursue one's goals (Dreze & Sen, 2002). Thirdly, it takes more than having freedom to act or to make a decision – one actually has to perform the act. Action in attaining goals that one has reason to value could result in the realisation of functionings (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). Last, but not least, one's impact on the world is the fourth dimension. An agent's actions have an impact not only on her family or society, but also on the world as a whole. Sometimes this impact could be intentional, while other times it is not (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010).

According to Crocker and Robeyns (2010), agency is valuable for three reasons. First, it is intrinsically valuable. This means that we value it for its own sake. It is better to act than be acted upon as someone's tool or a result of circumstance. Secondly, it has instrumental value. This means that when people are involved in making their own decisions and acting on how to run their lives, there is a chance that they might achieve their goals. Lastly, agency has constructive value. In this regard, a person as an agent freely weighs the pros and cons of her actions prior to acting, then makes decisions to act or not to act depending on the desired outcome (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). Therefore, a woman might pursue doctoral studies for the sake of holding the degree, as indicated earlier, but being a holder of a PhD will not only be useful for her alone, but also for the community, the country and the world as a whole, since she will contribute to knowledge both at a national and international level. For every individual, not only the agency is essential for the realisation of valued outcomes, but the environment should also be conducive and enable one to achieve the valued outcomes.

As indicated earlier, education expands people's chances to live a better life, and women in particular could certainly benefit from improving their educational paths. It is therefore necessary to discuss the intersection between the CA and education with the intention of showing that women, particularly black women, could improve their well-being by having the opportunities and freedoms to lead the lives they have reason to value.

## Capabilities approach and education

According to Walker and Boni (2013), universities should provide education for the public good rather than solely for economic gain. Education could also be considered to be a way of empowering women (Murphy-Graham, 2012). Nussbaum (2006) sees public education as vital for a healthy democracy. However, governments still reluctantly extend women's rights (Stromquist, 2006). This implies that much needs to be done in order for society to consider women as capable beings whose rights need to be recognised on the same level of those of men. Education responds to the basic need of an individual to be educated and, once acquired, it plays an important role in the expansion of other capabilities (Terzi, 2004). Higher education must focus on the student's critical and imaginative capacities. According to Unterhalter, Vaughan and Walker (2007), the CA argues that each person is able to develop a critical understanding of her valued beings and doings. This interlinks well with education as education's purpose is to enable students to choose the kind of lives they want for themselves. Students should be taught how to think and apply critical thinking as opposed to rote learning, because memorising the content will not assist in shaping individuals into citizens who can participate positively in their nation's development. Education fulfils a critical part in fostering development because it should expand the doings and beings of individuals (Walker, 2007). As stated, education can provide opportunities for individuals (both children and adults) to develop their senses, that is imagination and thought, and become critical thinkers in this way (Murphy-Graham, 2012).

As the Human Development Report (2010) states, the wealth of the country is its people. It is through education that people develop inquisitive minds and not just take first-hand information without questioning it. Education enables people to exchange ideas with respect, even when they do not agree with what is being said (Nussbaum, 2006). The world consists of diverse nations and one must be able to resolve differences peacefully, regardless of ethnicity, religion and other areas of conflict. One has to learn about other nations as well as engage in discussions with people who are different from oneself (Nussbaum, 2006).

Sen (cited in Terzi, 2004) views basic capabilities as the minimal beings and doings that foster well-being. Education is included in these fundamental capabilities. Nussbaum (2004: 332) agrees by arguing that "[i]f there was a time when illiteracy was not a barrier to employment that time has passed." Today's world economy requires both men and women to be educated in order to participate in the labour market and to expand their resources or knowledge to attain well-being. Individuals who have earned doctoral degrees, for example, are in a better position to expand the knowledge of others (students) and, in this way, expand their boundaries of knowledge. They can also exercise leadership in professions, business, government and society since they are regarded as experts in their fields of study



(Nettles, 1990). However, one cannot talk of capabilities without raising the issue of human rights. Although all people have a right to education, many inequalities are still being perpetuated; thus, the CA looks deeply into the opportunities and freedoms that individuals have to achieve what they value, according to Unterhalter et al. (2007: 16). These scholars argue that the CA provides rich resources for thinking about social justice in relation to education.

According to Dreze and Sen (1999) and Robeyns (2006), education is important for various reasons, as mentioned previously. It is intrinsically important, meaning that it could be important simply for the sake of knowledge. It also plays an instrumental role which can be personal or collective: personal importance is where education can help one find a job and participate in the labour market to bring about positive change – having education helps people find information on economic opportunities. Collective importance refers to the fact that, once individuals are educated, they can have a positive impact on their families, societies, countries and the world as a whole, because they are now able to expand their capabilities. The non-instrumental economic roles of education, on the other hand, open an individual's mind about different people and the different backgrounds that they come from. This is vital for interaction with other people, and helps people realise that they do not have to lead similar lives than their parents, for example. Furthermore, these roles assist students in learning to live in a society where people have different views. In the case of women, the opportunity to be educated helps them to acquire the relevant knowledge to equip them in the fight against oppression. Men, in contrast, could learn that it is also their duty as parents to take care of the children. Most importantly, being well educated can also contribute to the expansion of other capabilities, for example, a woman has a choice to leave an abusive man because she would be able to take up a job and earn an income (Nussbaum, 2003).

### **Capabilities approach and gender**

For the CA, social structures and organisations need to be just (Sen, 1999). Social conditions should enable individuals to achieve their desired functionings. In this regard, the CA argues for equal opportunities for individuals to choose lives they have reason to value. For example, women are usually the ones who experience inequality; thus, the CA argues for equal opportunities and freedoms to be what and who they want to be. According to Nussbaum (2000), women worldwide lack support for basic functions that make decent human life possible. Unlike men, women are prone to sexual abuse, physical violence and have less chances to be educated than men. Laws in some parts of the world are such that women do not own land and that they take care of the children and the family without earning any significant income. Women, given the necessary support such as good nutrition, education and family support, are capable of human functions (Nussbaum, 2000).

Nussbaum (2004) gives an example of a woman who is empowered to leave an abusive husband after acquiring some form of education – education has, in this case, expanded the capability of liberation.

As indicated, Brown and Watson (2010) mention that some married women end their marriages in pursuit of education. However, according to Murphy-Graham (2012), one of her interviewees, states that some women remarry after divorce because they need a man to take care of them; they do it out of necessity as the man agrees to help them out economically. This resonates with gender socialisation and patriarchy being the main factors that shape society.

Although girls and boys have equal access to formal education, girls are still restricted from accessing education due to gendered social norms and traditions that discourage girls and women to pursue HE (Robeyns, 2003). As mentioned previously, some parents and communities believe a woman's place is in the home, while men belong in the public sphere. The reason for this is explained in Robeyns' list of capabilities for gender equality in a Western context. This capability involves taking care of the family by "raising children and taking care of other dependents" without any monetary compensation, which is seen as a woman's role. Other capabilities included in Robeyns' list are: life and physical health, mental well-being, bodily integrity and safety, social relations, political empowerment, education and knowledge, domestic work and non-market care, paid work and other projects, shelter and environment, mobility, leisure activities, time autonomy, respect and religion.

An equal number of boys and girls enrolled in education institutions does not mean there is equal access to education; there has to be an understanding of relationships and practices (Unterhalter, 2007). Moreover, the attributes of a person need to be acknowledged, and that these could change due to the freedom and agency an individual has (Unterhalter, 2007). This means that women could "do gender" differently depending on the situation they find themselves in. For instance, regardless of the freedoms, opportunities and agency that a black woman has to acquire doctoral education, these could be hindered by societal expectations of her. Stromquist (2006) argues that, in order to address women's equality, women must have equal participation in the public sphere, taking into account their different needs in the private sphere that might deny them equal opportunities to men, such as childcare and domestic violence.

### **Capabilities approach and empowerment**

Women, particularly black women, have been greatly marginalised and are still experiencing inequalities in the home, school and politics (Collins, 1991). In order to redress their

disadvantaged position, there has been a tremendous urgency with regard to educating girls and women across the world. Two of the Millennium Development Goals focus on the attainment of primary education and the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women by eliminating gender disparities in education (Unterhalter, 2007). As Murphy-Graham (2012: 15) proposes, “empowerment is a process of recognition, capacity building and action.” Empowerment brings about more personal agency in that one can act towards change rather than wait for others to change their world or situations (Stromquist, 2003). As agency is one of the key concepts in the CA, in this study, pursuing doctoral education enables black women to have freedoms to choose to be what and who they want to be. Obtaining a doctoral degree in itself does not guarantee the realisation of functionings; hence, it is imperative that women act on achieving their goals.

According to Monkman (2011) empowerment is assumed to be a result of schooling (Monkman, 2011). As Stromquist (2006) further states that empowerment is a socio-political concept that goes beyond women’s participation in political issues and consciousness, and includes cognitive, psychological and economic components. This means that women should understand their conditions of subordination, which might lead them to make choices that go against cultural patterns of behaviour. This would involve acquiring new knowledge to create a different understanding of gender relations and to break the gender inequality cycle that people grew up conforming to (Stromquist, 2003). It is through knowledge that women will acquire intellectual skills and habits that are conducive to social change (Stromquist, 2006). It is, therefore, important that HE, specifically doctoral education, provides students with knowledge to choose lives they have reason to value.

Empowerment is not an easy road to travel because women often have to deal with violence in the home and unsafe community environments that limit their social mobility and restrict participation in their development (Stromquist, 2003). In summary, black women become empowered by means of education, which brings into focus a life beyond what they have come to know through gender socialisation and patriarchy. The chance to study enlarges people’s horizons, particularly those who have been at the receiving end of inequalities.

## Conclusion

It became clear through the discussion of the CA and its relation to agency, education, gender and empowerment that, if every country were to incorporate this approach to enhance the well-being of its citizens, governments need to devise strategies to help their citizens “unlearn” the gendered roles that are imposed through socialisation. Because the CA sees well-being as a set of “doings and beings,” it looks deeper into the circumstances that enable or prohibits one to act. It does not only focus on what people have as ends, but

also on the means they have at their disposal to reach those ends. In its view on education, the CA does not focus only on how many students qualify for HE entry, but also on the reasons why one qualifies or does not qualify. As indicated, the aim of this approach is to provide a framework to identify those factors that should be improved to enable both students, from rich and poor backgrounds, to develop optimally within and through HE.

In relation to agency, the CA states that, regardless of the identical opportunities that people might have, their functionings might be different. This is because people act differently to obtain their personal desired or valued outcomes. Furthermore, people put in different amounts of efforts in order to achieve what they value. Consequently, it is not only about having the opportunity and freedom, but it is, most importantly, about the lengths to which one would go to achieve that which one values. Considering gender and empowerment, the CA argues that governments need to create policies that empower women as the disadvantaged group due to gender roles. This can only be done when people in positions of power change their mentality and educate the nation against patriarchy.

The following chapter lays out the methodology and design of the research. As the CA is the framework that guided the study, a case study method was deemed appropriate because it generates in-depth understanding, in this case, of the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies. The CA complements this method because its concepts, such as functionings, capabilities and well-being, relates to the individual and her experiences.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology and methods that were used to conduct the study. It gives an outline of the research approach, the tools used to gather the data, and the data analysis. The relevant ethical considerations are also described.

The overarching aim of this study was to explore the experiences of black women in their doctoral journeys in order to shed light on which capabilities and functionings were valued by the participants and which personal, social and environmental factors influenced their agency. Ultimately, the exploration of black women's doctoral experiences could aid in attracting and retaining this minority group until completion of their studies. The research questions that emerged from this aim are:

- In what ways are black women's HE experiences of doctoral study shaped by gender?
- How does race shape their doctoral experiences?
- Which capabilities enable them to strive for and reach what they value?
- What challenges do they face in pursuit of their doctorates?

As the nature of the study was explanatory (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), a qualitative approach was followed.

### Qualitative methodology

The goal of a qualitative approach is to gain intimate understanding of the participants under study (O'Leary, 2010). This approach was considered most suitable for this study because researchers within this approach "always study human action from the insider's perspective" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 53). Stemming from an interpretivist philosophical paradigm, the qualitative approach assumes that people construct their own realities to make sense of their experiences and, thus, arrange them in a manner that reflects their views or perceptions and belief systems (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Social scientists within this paradigm are interested in how people make meaning of their worlds as they interrelate with their worlds and other people (Thomas, 2009). For instance, the researcher has to look closely at her participants, using her knowledge as the researcher to interpret what the respondents say in order to gain understanding of how they make sense of their worlds.

A qualitative methodology is sometimes referred to as "naturalistic" because it explores an event in its natural context; in other words, the researcher behaves naturally in trying to

understand how her participants construct meaning of their social world, as people have feelings and understandings that affect how they perceive the world (Thomas, 2009). This methodology is, therefore, not laboratory based.

A qualitative study could be exploratory, descriptive or explanatory (Henning, 2004). As Maree et al. (2010: 59) argues, “human life can only be understood from within” in a qualitative approach. This approach focuses on people’s experiences, how they construct social meaning out of the social world by means of their interaction with other people and make social life a product of human beings. By this, Maree means that people have to be in their social contexts in order to understand their perceptions of their own activities, as every context is unique. Thus, the researcher has to know how her respondents view the world and how their everyday life influences their view of their world and how they construct meaning from it. Consequently, for me as a researcher to understand how black women in doctoral studies experience their academic journey, it was important that I interview those women who fall in that category and let them tell me their experiences. As the participants then narrate their doctoral journeys, it would be able to gain insight into their experiences and, thus, understand their academic path better.

The research design is discussed below to explain how the participants were selected and how many participated in this study.

## **Research design**

A research design is a plan or strategy that explains the process of the selection of participants, which data-gathering techniques or tools should be used and how data analysis will be done (Maree, Creswell, Ebersohn, Eloff, Ferreira, Ivankova, Jansen, Nieuwenhuis, Pietersen, Clark & Van der Westhuizen, 2010). For the purpose of this study, a case study research design was employed.

A case study refers to a systematic inquiry with the aim to describe and explain a phenomenon of interest (Maree et al., 2010). This research approach is used to “generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context” (Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Hubby, Avery & Sheikh, 2011: 1). Furthermore, case studies seek to engage with and report the complexity of social activity with the intent to represent the meaning that individual social actors make out of their interaction with social environments (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Its advantage is that it can give marginalised groups such as children and women a platform to voice their opinions and, thus, power to the powerless or a voice to the voiceless (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989). When people are not able to voice their views, they could be marginalised or overlooked in research; hence, they lead silenced lives (McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993).

According to Henning (2004), a case study is distinguished from other qualitative research methodologies in that it intends to give intensive descriptions and analysis of single units such as an individual, group or community. Babbie (2001) and Crowe et al. (2011) posit that a case study could be explanatory or descriptive, in other words, it can be used to explain or describe events or phenomena in everyday contexts – it captures information by answering the “how, what and why” questions. Furthermore, it aims to gain insight or in-depth understanding of the dynamics in a specific situation by employing multiple sources or techniques in data gathering (Maree et al., 2010). As a result, a case study method was most suitable for conducting this study, because it “allows the researcher to concentrate on a specific instance or situation” (Bell, 1993: 8).

However, as with most qualitative research designs, the case study design is limited in that its findings cannot be generalised. Despite this limitation, I still opted for this design as my intention was not to generalise, but to capture in-depth understanding of how black women in doctoral studies in one university experience their doctoral journeys. This included their thoughts on what should be done in order to attract and retain this group of students until completion.

According to Stake (2000), there are three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. An intrinsic case study is undertaken in order to learn about a unique phenomenon. In this type of study, it is the researcher’s role to define the uniqueness of the phenomenon by stating the features that distinguishes it from others. Instrumental case studies, on the other hand, use a particular case “to gain broader appreciation of an issue or phenomenon” (Stake, 2000 cited in Crowe et al., 2011: 2). The current study used a collective case study, in other words, a number of cases were studied in order to investigate some general phenomenon. Each of the participants represented a single case. The researcher intended to determine how black women experience doctoral studies. These women could be mothers or without children, they could be married or not married, they could be staying on campus or off campus, and so forth. The differences among them were investigated, as well as their impact on their doctoral journeys. The collective case study has an advantage in that it allows for comparison to be drawn across several cases within the study (Crowe et al., 2011).

Since this study focused on the experiences of black women in doctoral studies, I located it within feminist research which “places diverse experiences of women at the centre rather than the margins of social investigation” (Burton, 2000: 35). Burns and Walker (2005: 66) argue that research might be described as feminist when “femaleness and maleness and the differences and the dominations between and within them are made a central feature for

research questions, conceptualisation and analysis.” This study intended to explore how the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies are influenced or shaped by gender. Hearing women’s voices through their experiences is central to feminist methodologies.

It is also worth noting that case studies “may be approached in different ways depending on the epistemological stand of the researcher” (Crowe et al., 2011: 4), in other words, whether the researcher is critical (questioning her or other researchers’ assumptions); interpretivist (trying to understand how individuals ascribe meaning to the social world); or positivist (knowledge based on experimental methods). However, a researcher has to be aware of her positionality (own preferences, likes and dislikes, political affiliation, assumptions) and how this affects her interpretation (Thomas, 2009). Thus, this study followed a qualitative approach. Particularly for this study, I needed to be careful not to force the data into fitting my assumptions and to be biased in data interpretation by imposing my personal assumptions, as a black woman in HE, on my participants. I had to maintain an open mind and let the data “speak.” Although researchers observe the characteristics of units of analysis in a case study (Cohen & Manion, 1989), for the purpose of the current research, the participants were not observed. Instead, in-depth interviews were conducted, adopting elements of the life-history method, in order to gain information on how this target group experiences their doctoral journey.

The case study design, which is the dominant methodology in my study, is supplemented well by the feminist approach seeing that the latter puts women at the centre of the research. The feminist approach will be discussed below.

### **Situating the research within feminist theory**

Feminist researchers argue that women experience exploitation in their subordination to men. Feminist research aims to bring about social change, which makes this approach reflexive and informed by a theory of power (Letherby, 2003). Feminists frequently ask questions different from those that are traditionally raised in political research and often use ethnographic, narrative and cross-cultural methods which are not always taught to students of mainstream political sciences.

Feminists seek to understand the research participants’ experiences seeing that feminism itself is a movement against sexism and the exploitation of women. Because gender lies at the centre of social inquiry, feminism gives voice to ignored and silenced women and aim to reduce the unequal and discriminating social order in this way (Sarantakos, 2005).

According to Fonow and Cook (1991), feminist research claims the following:



- It does not use traditional research methods; it focuses on feminist methodologies/methods, which are qualitative in nature.
- It originates from women's experiences and sees women's daily experiences as of critical concern.
- It takes into consideration the researcher's reflexivity or positionality. Feminist researchers reflect on and investigate and explore critically and analytically the nature of the research process.

## Sampling

Sampling is the process of "selecting elements of a population for inclusion in a research study" (O'Leary, 2010: 162). The current study comprised a sample of seven black women, five of whom were in their final year of doctoral studies, while two had recently completed their doctoral studies. I interviewed black women with and without children, in order to see the impact of having children or not on their academic progress. The number of doctoral students who graduated in June 2013 was 63 (accessed on University of the Free State website on 28 June 2013); this is an indication that there are not many doctoral graduates per year.

I used purposive sampling to find participants, which means that I selected them according to criteria relevant to the research questions (Maree et al., 2010). I obtained a list of enrolled black women doctoral students from the Directorate Institute of Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP) at the UFS and then sent personal emails to the students who met the criteria, asking them to participate in the study. My participants were those who responded to my email. Below is a table of participants:

**Table 1: Participants' information**

	<b>Khanya</b>	<b>Moleboheng</b>	<b>Judy</b>	<b>Palesa</b>	<b>Pinki</b>	<b>Kholu</b>	<b>Belinda</b>
<b>Age</b>	34	27	38	38	28	34	32
<b>Marital status</b>	Divorced	Single	Single	Divorced	Single	Married	Single
<b>No. of children</b>	2	None	2	3	None	3	None
<b>Discipline</b>	Business Management	Physics	Education	Physics	Physics	Gender Studies	Human Nutrition
<b>Year of study</b>	3	2 years 3 months	Completed	3	Completed	8	4
<b>1st generation/ Post-graduate</b>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Employment<sup>1</sup> (full/part-time)</b>	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time
<b>Funding</b>	Self	NRF	UFS	NRF	NFR	UFS	Government of Ghana

### **Data collection methods**

Data were collected by means of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the aim to obtain rich information. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed. I started by introducing myself and providing information about my study: I explained the topic and the problem statement and stated the significance of conducting the study, namely to make recommendations regarding policy in HE institutions. I then explained the relevant ethical considerations, which are discussed in detail later in the chapter. In order to obtain the

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<sup>1</sup> Part-time in this instance means the participant was studying and working at the same time, while full-time means the participant was studying and maybe doing student assistant jobs on campus.

relevant information for my study, I asked the participants questions about their life histories specifically.

### **In-depth interviews**

In-depth interviews are used in qualitative research (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003) because they combine structure with flexibility. I followed an interview guide, but was not restricted to asking prepared questions only. Relevant issues that I had not initially covered in the interview questions were raised by the participants and I included these. These interviews were in a semi-structured format, with open-ended questions that gave room for probing. Depending on the nature of the interview, new questions could arise from the interviewee's response, which could be probed for further explanation (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

The reason for using in-depth interviews was to obtain rich information from a small group of people (seven participants). The idea was not to generalise, but to have a representation of the experiences of this group of participants, "to seek insight into participants' perspectives, attitudes and behaviours" (Maree et al., 2010: 115). Adaptability is a major advantage of an interview. As the interviewer is conducting the interview, she observes the respondents, for instance, sees the facial expression, body language and the tone of voice, and will know when to probe further (Bell, 1993). The ability to assess non-verbal behaviour places the interviewer in a better position to gauge the non-verbal behaviour of the respondents ("I see this question makes you uncomfortable") and to adjust her questioning accordingly. It is through these interviews that the researcher seeks understanding and, in doing so, reflects upon what the interviewee is saying (Maree et al., 2010).

Furthermore, in-depth interviews enable the researcher to identify how the participants interact with the people around them. Another advantage of interviews is that there is a better response rate, unlike in self-administered questionnaires, for instance, seeing that the researcher is having a conversation with the participants in order to obtain the information required. Interviews ensure privacy because the interviewer can arrange a date and time that best suit the participants and ensure that the interview is conducted in private.

### **Pilot study**

A pilot study was conducted in order to test whether my interview schedule addressed the aim and objectives of the research and the research questions. In this regard, a pilot study enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Two participants were interviewed, Nthabiseng in her third year of doctoral study, and Lineo, who had just completed and was awarded her degree in June 2013. (Both names are pseudonyms.) I met them through a

colleague who was an acquaintance of Nthabiseng, who then referred me to Lineo. A summary of the significant characteristics of these two women is shown below (table 3).

**Table 2: Pilot study participants**

Name	Nthabiseng	Lineo
Age	42	30
Field of study	Soil Sciences	Economic Sciences
Year of study	Completed (2012)	Third year
Marital status	Divorced	Single
Number of children	1	None
Full-time/part-time	Full-time	Full-time
Funding	NRF	Government of Lesotho

By the time the pilot study was conducted, my research questions were as follows: 1. In what ways are black women's HE experiences shaped by gender? 2. What enables the progress of black women doctoral students? 3. Are there particular challenges faced by students who are mothers?

I only had a few questions formulated. My first question to the participants would be whether they had any children. To those who responded they had children, I would then ask "how does being a student at the same time as being a mother affect your performance as doctoral student?" To those who said they do not have any children, my next question would be "what made you decide not to have children yet?" The other question would be "to what extent do you feel you have been able to exercise the freedom to be what or who you want, thus have reason to value, irrespective of the oppressive gender roles?" These questions were drawn and guided by the third research question. However, it was after conducting the pilot study that I refined the research questions, as well as the interview questions, because I decided that the aspect of being a mother and how challenging motherhood is alongside studying had to come from the data. In this way, chances of asking leading questions were reduced.

Lineo was not married, did not have any children and stayed in a university residence. Nthabiseng was divorced and a single parent and on study leave. She was staying off-

campus with her child and travelled to and from the university by car. Lineo described her journey as challenging but manageable, because she focused solely on her studies, and the relationships which she had were academic, that is, besides her family. Being focused, she described, made life easier for her. Nthabiseng, on the other hand, stated that the academic life could be more manageable had she not had all other responsibilities, that of being a mother to her 15-year-old daughter. Also, being the oldest of her three siblings, she had to take care of her retired parents back home and pay for her youngest sister's university tuition fees.

The pilot study revealed that my interview questions were biased in that, as a mother myself and studying at the same time, I focused more on women with children while the study explored the experiences of black women, with and without children. For example, I realised that questions such as "How does being a student at the same time as being a mother affect your performance as doctoral student?" were leading and needed to be refined. On the other hand, I discovered that some questions are very sensitive, which could have a negative impact on the ethics that govern social research. My question "What made you decide not to have children?" serves as an example. From Lineo's facial expression (which indicated that she might have experienced child loss of some sort), I gathered that I had overstepped the boundaries and touched on a sensitive subject. Even though she answered, I felt I should have let the topic emerge naturally from the conversation. For instance, while talking about her personal information, I could have probed about having children or not, instead of assuming that she had decided not to have any children. On seeing her reaction, I apologised and informed her that she does not have to answer any questions if she felt uncomfortable. She accepted my apology and we continued to the next question.

In summary, though these two respondents encountered challenges, both had capabilities and were active agents in pursuing their dreams. Nthabiseng claimed she did not have equal freedom to her colleagues who did not have children, and who also managed to work at night or in the early hours of the day as they had Internet access. She emphasised that her not being able to use the Internet at home puts a terrible strain on her progress.

It was through these responses that I found that the pilot study really helped in testing and refining my interview questions to the ones below and my research questions to the ones mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

## **Interview questions**

### **Biographical information**

- Age: How old were you when you started with your doctoral studies and how old are you now?
- In which faculty are you registered?
- Under which department are you registered?
- What is your marital status?
- Do you have any children? If yes, how many?

### **Broad experiences on being a woman in PhD**

- Can you tell me about your experiences of doctoral study so far? [Why did you decide to do a PhD? Have you always seen yourself pursuing a PhD? What career are you hoping to follow with the PhD? Is there any other career you wanted to choose but could not?]

### **Research question 1: In what ways are black women's HE experiences of doctoral study shaped by gender?**

- Can you tell me how or if your experiences of choosing and doing doctoral study have been influenced by gender? [In what ways? If not, why do you think this is?]
- How do you find being a woman in your department?
- How do you relate with your supervisor? Is this influenced at all by gender – either your gender or that of your supervisor?
- Any support discussions to assist in your studies/postgraduate community for support?
- What does the society you come from say about women in doctoral studies?

### **Research question 2: How does race shape their doctoral experiences??**

#### **Broad experiences on being a black woman**

- How does being black impact on your studies?

- Has affirmative action or Black Economic Empowerment influenced your decision to pursue PhD?
- As a black woman, what do you see yourself do to change the status of black women and the country as a whole?

**Research question 3: What capabilities enable them to strive for and reach what they value?**

#### **Academically**

- How could you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
- How do you find the institutional facilities?
- What should be done to make the learning environment more suitable to ensure students' throughput?
- Please tell me about the issue on funding, who pays for your studies?

#### **Socially**

- How would you describe the support of your friends and family in this journey?

#### **Self**

- How do you manage to keep going? (Inner motivation/agency)

**Research question 4: What challenges do they face in pursuit of their doctorates?**

- What challenges have you encountered in this journey, academically, socially, financially or any other way?
- How have you kept going irrespective of these challenges?
- Any primary and soft skills learned in this journey?
- Generally, how would you describe this journey? Positive or negative, and why?
- Anything else you would like to say/add?

#### **Ethics**

Ethics within social science research are guidelines or principles to direct the researcher's actions and to ensure that the researcher treats the participants with great sensitivity as they are human beings not objects (Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

This study, like all professional studies conducted in social research, has an obligation to adhere to the ethical standards of conducting research. Thus, this study adhered to academic and professional ethical considerations and respected the subjects under study. In this way, the study was in line with the principles employed in qualitative research. Ethical principles that were observed in this study are minimising harm, respecting autonomy, protecting privacy, offering reciprocity and treating participants fairly (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). It is also important for the researcher to respect the truth (Bassey, 1999).

### **Minimising harm**

It is highly essential for the researcher to not harm the participants in her study. Harm in this context would mean any emotional pain, for example, asking questions that hurt the participant. The participant has to feel the need to share any life experiences voluntarily and not be caused emotional pain through insensitive questions asked by the interviewer.

### **Respecting autonomy**

It is the researcher's duty to let the participants partake in the study knowingly. The participants need to know the purpose of the study and the consequences of their participation in the study, in other words, how being involved in the study will influence their lives. In the current study, I stated that the research could be published and that data given by participants could be included in the publication (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). I informed the participants that their participation in the study is voluntary and respected their autonomy for deciding to partake in the study (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). They were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any point they no longer wanted to participate and that the data provided by such participants would not be noted, if they so wished. I also discussed with them the time that might be spent on the interview in order for them to make an informed decision whether participation would suit their schedules.

### **Informed consent**

The purpose of the study was explained to participants in a participant information form which described the aim and significance of the study. Participants were given a written consent form to read and then sign at their free will, after which the interview commenced. Confidentiality and anonymity to assure their privacy were emphasised. However, I explained to the participants the extent to which confidentiality can be maintained, as this study is conducted for academic reasons. Bell (2005) states that the informed consent procedure must minimise the researcher's legal liability to ensure the researcher's rights and protection as it does for the participants'. This means that the researcher needs to be protected legally as much as the participants. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect the participants' identities.



### **Offering reciprocity**

Conducting a study must not only benefit the researcher, but the respondents as well. Reciprocity does not have to be financial, but could be through representing the respondents' views in the manner that they presented them to the researcher. This is closely related to the aspect of respect for the truth, which will be discussed shortly. I acknowledged the respondents' taking time off their work to participate in the study without promising them anything (Bassey, 1999).

### **Treating participants fairly**

I did not show any favouritism among my participants, for example, I respected them equally and tried to treat everyone the same. As a result, I ensured equal treatment to all participants and avoided being biased in this way. As Bell (2005) states, there are many factors that could result in bias, for instance, a researcher could be biased when she has strong views about the topic being researched, either deliberately or not. I was careful not to impose my views on the study or the participants as this topic is of great interest to me personally.

### **Respect for the truth**

Lastly, according to Bassey (1999), the researcher must have respect for truth. As a researcher, I was truthful in data collection, analysis and reporting of the findings. This means I did or will not deceive the participants or the readers of my dissertation by making claims that are untruthful or untrustworthy.

In summary, Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2001) argue that research ethics are essentially about clarifying the nature of an agreement that both the researcher and the respondents have entered into by obtaining consent from those interviewed, explaining how the data will be used and by agreeing to the usage of the data.

### **Data processing**

I transcribed all interviews as soon as I possibly could, for example, I transcribed verbatim from the voice recorder the same day of interviewing for most respondents. This brought me closer to the data and allowed me to recall incidents while still fresh in my mind and perform initial analysis in this way. I printed the transcripts and repeatedly read them in order to make sense of what was said. I then began coding the data, which entailed reading the transcripts until themes began to emerge. Words and phrases that came up often were highlighted in different colours until key categories were formed. These categories were: pre-university stories; family background; school; choosing a university; undergraduate experiences; quality of learning capabilities; and choosing to pursue doctoral studies. Quotes were taken

from transcripts in order to support these themes and maintain the participants' voices so as to enrich the descriptive data and present the participants' realities accurately.

### **Data analysis**

Henning (2004) posits that qualitative data analysis is a process in which a data set is organised by breaking it down into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns and discovering what is important for new knowledge, thereby deciding what to tell the readers. It is an approach aimed at "understanding how participants make meaning of the phenomenon under study" (Maree et al., 2010: 103). This study used content analysis. Content analysis is an approach used in qualitative research to identify and summarise the themes that emerge from the data. It can be used to analyse qualitative responses to open-ended questions in both surveys and interviews. It looks at data from different angles in order to identify keys within a text that will assist the researcher in understanding and interpreting the raw data (Maree et al., 2010).

### **Credibility and trustworthiness**

In any research, it is essential that the findings are trustworthy and represent what the respondents have discussed, while reflecting their perceptions on what is being studied and not forgetting, though, that there is no such thing as absolute truth, because knowledge is constructed differently (Thomas, 2009). However, it is vital that the researcher ensures that she uses suitable methods to design the research, starting from whether the study is qualitative or quantitative, to collecting and analysing data. What the researcher writes has to reflect her respondents' perceptions of their social environment. As a result, it is crucial that the study is trustworthy.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the data-gathering instrument who "lends a specific tone to the research" and, therefore, needs to be transparent and genuine in the process, or else her work will be untrustworthy (Henning, 2004: 39). Since reliability and validity are terms associated with quantitative research, for qualitative researchers these could be substituted for credibility and trustworthiness (Maree et al., 2010). However, some qualitative researchers still make use of the terms "reliability" and "validity" in their qualitative studies. For instance, Silverman (2005) purports that it is essential for a researcher to prove to her audiences that methods and procedures used within a study are reliable and that the conclusions are valid. In order for it to be trustworthy, a qualitative study needs to produce valid findings that can be used to contribute to scientific knowledge. The researcher, therefore, should ensure that the methods and instruments that are applied are appropriate and will yield valid results. To ensure trustworthiness in my study, I listened to the recordings repeatedly and started grouping data into themes and subthemes which I highlighted with

different colours. I then supported the themes with the participants' exact words from the transcripts.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained the research methodology by stating the research techniques used in this study. The population under study was identified and a justification for the chosen methods was provided. A link was established between the methodology and design, and the tools used to gather and analyse the data. As the aim of the study was to explore the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies at a South African university, the research questions were formulated in a way that included gender (females), race (black), the capabilities that enabled them to complete the doctorate, and the challenges they encountered throughout their doctoral journey. To obtain the relevant information, I conducted interviews which I recorded and then transcribed. Since it was a sample of only seven women, I did the transcribing and analysis myself, which increased my understanding of my participants.

The next chapter lays out the findings and provides a discussion on whether my research questions were answered. This will be followed by a conclusion as to what the results mean for this study.

## CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies at a South African university, using the CA as a framework. In this chapter, I identify some of the reasons that contributed to my participants' decision to take on doctoral studies, as well as what enabled them to continue with their studies despite the claims by some, such as Magano (2011), that many black women pursuing doctoral studies drop out before completion. Subsequently, I present and discuss the empirical findings that emerged from the data.

The participants in this study were seven women whose biographies will be discussed separately and in detail. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the participants' identity as per the ethical considerations governing social research.

In order to set out the experiences of these women, I will first give a biographical overview of the participants who make up my sample, followed by a discussion on how gender and race promoted or hindered their progress. I will discuss the factors that enabled them to complete their doctoral studies and focus on what contributes to the ability to persevere for those who are still in the process of their degrees. The challenges that all participants were facing or experienced through their doctoral journeys will also be discussed.

The following table provides the pseudonyms of the participants and the dates and time of their interviews.

**Table 3: Dates and time of participants' interviews**

<b>Participant's name</b>	<b>Date of the interview</b>	<b>Time of the interview</b>
Khanya	11/09/2013	50 minutes
Moleboheng	11/09/2013	1 hour 10 minutes
Judy	17/09/2013	1 hour 10 minutes
Pinki	03/10/2013	54 minutes
Kholu	03/10/2013	1 hour 29 minutes
Palesa	18/10/2013	1 hour 15 minutes
Belinda	19/02/2014	1 hour

## BIOGRAPHIES OF PARTICIPANTS

### Khanya

Khanya is a 34-year-old South African and the first of three children from an *academically inclined family background*. Born in Bloemfontein, all three children went to private schools and both her parents were teachers. She states: *I come from a family whereby we didn't really have a choice of whether we want to go to tertiary or not; we knew we were going, it was just up to you to decide what you were going to do and what you were going to do to pass and choosing an institution, but to go you will go. So I had no choice*. She emphasises this point by stating that her younger sisters are university graduates as well, and they are still continuing with their studies. Despite the fact that she comes from an academically inclined background and was given no choice but to pursue tertiary education, Khanya states that she had always wanted to be a university graduate. She recalls saying when she was in Grade 6 that she wishes to have at least one *belt*, referring to a degree.

After completing high school in 1996, Khanya pursued an undergraduate degree in dietetics at Medunsa, which is now part of the University of Limpopo. She started working at an accounting firm after completing her degree. Even though it was not in her field, it was the first job offer she got and she had no choice but to accept. It was through this position that she was exposed to the business world, as the company sent her on a business introductory course at Wits University, which stirred her passion for business. She adds, *I got exposed to women in senior positions, but they had to have certain degrees and qualifications to be there*. She also realised that *we run short of people to fill in the managerial positions*. She was motivated to study as a result, and enrolled for a master's in Business Administration (MBA) at the UFS in 2007.

However, due to family and work responsibilities she found the degree difficult. *I had to search for a government position as by that time I just had a baby, I wanted to study further and work within the private sector is hectic and I used to travel a lot and work responsibilities were too much, hence had to take a quick cut. I needed a more relaxed job because I needed to study. We attended classes weekly in three months, and it was going to be impossible from the private sector, at the same time raise my kid and start a family, so I started working for a provincial health government here in Bloemfontein as a provincial dietician from 2007 June until 2011*. She excelled in her studies and enjoyed the module on research methodology. Owing to her outstanding performance, the department provided her with funds to present a paper in Las Vegas in 2010. This exposure convinced her that she made the right choice by going into the business field. She explains: *That also kind of made*

*me want to go on with PhD, because I got exposed to different nationalities that had PhDs and also who were in the process, so I think the interest just grew.*

Resigning from a job in the private sector and moving to a position in a government department had a negative impact on her finances and put a strain on her family, because she could no longer spend as much time with her husband. She now earned less and had to work an extra job to provide for her family and pay her tuition fees, since she did not have a bursary. She recalls: *Because there was a pay-cut issue I had to work after hours, which is allowed by government. I had to work after hours as a private consultant dietician, so it was a bit hectic because I had a kid, but fortunately my kid stayed at my parents, and I had a husband and now I had to work up until four, then after that had to work again up until six if there was business.* She completed her MBA and wanted to venture into PhD studies. She also resigned from her position in government. *In 2011 I decided to leave and go full-time private because I wanted to do PhD as well and I just felt being in the government environment was going to become an obstacle, as I had to work until four and I needed a job that was going to be flexible.*

Khanya started with her doctoral studies in 2011 and, during the interview, she states that she would aim to submit by the end of 2013. Apart from enjoying the research methodology in her MBA programme, she decided to pursue doctoral studies because she discovered that, even after obtaining her MBA, her progression within the labour market was not meeting her expectations, thus she enrolled at the UFS for a part-time PhD in Business Management. During her time working at the government department, she realised she was subordinate to people with lower qualifications who did not understand her work or creativity and limited by *red tapes* that are a part of government departments. *I got exposed to working in government, where there was a manner of doing things in a rigid manner, regardless of your creativity you couldn't move forward with it, sometimes you find you are sitting with women as leaders but you find that they don't want to put you up and when you look at their qualifications as well you find that you are doing the work of somebody who should be sitting underneath you.*

While describing her PhD journey thus far, Khanya says it has been a very enjoyable adventure. Despite the challenges, she is having a great experience: *There are ups and downs but I am enjoying what I am doing, you know, at the level of PhD, even master's, but mainly in PhD, you do your own thing, it's about you pushing yourself and I am enjoying it thus far.* She works solely with her supervisor, meaning there are no peer group discussions or a postgraduate community to share ideas with and who support her, but she emphasised how good the supervisor is to her, and how good the department as a whole has been: *I*

*have a good relationship with him, he is supportive.* She sounds eager to learn and open to critique and sees the supervisor's comments as such. Concerning gender, she says there has never been an experience that she felt she was being discriminated against or treated unfairly.

In relation to her experience of doctoral studies as a black woman, Khanya says: *I have a very supportive supervisor, I think with institutions it will vary. Sometimes I think as blacks we take criticism and want to make it a race issue. Yes, there are instances when other people can be racist, but fortunately for me, my management department is good to me, from even while I was doing my MBA. It shouldn't be about colour, but about what you can do. I never take it as racism issue, I know there are things that I know that they don't know and those that they know that I don't know, and therefore we all have things to learn from the other.* Considering previous racial incidents at the UFS, Khanya seemed to be very positive and determined to attain her goal. Although she has not experienced discrimination due to race, she admits that not all departments might be non-racist: *Sometimes you will hear stories that you will feel that this is racism, and yet again, if you think you know it all, then when a person tells you how it should be done, then you will think it is about race. It depends on how you view life.*

With regard to success or developments that came as a result of embarking on this journey, Khanya names, among other things, independence and time management: *It teaches you so many things about yourself, for instance, I am no longer dependent on anyone academically, and I can manage my time which is highly important.* She also states that she has learned not to be emotional when it comes to business, as she says *business is a very tricky business that you don't need to take personal; it has its ups and downs.* She adds that one learns how to argue and write critically, which improves reading and writing skills.

Although Khanya seems enthusiastic about her studies, she mentions two challenges, namely going through a divorce during her PhD and exhaustion because of her studies. As much as she found relief due to the divorce, she still feels it was a loss, because she believes studying in itself had a negative impact on her marriage. *That's why I think most women drop out because they don't have time for family and their studies ... because, like I said, you kind of end up sacrifice certain things.* Another issue that had an impact on her PhD, is exhaustion, and she states: *[L]ike I could just leave it as is; I think the toughest thing for me now is fatigue.* Khanya is a mother of two daughters, aged 7 and 4. Since the divorce, she feels her responsibilities have been reduced and thus she can plan her life in a way that suits both her and her children. Her children both live with her parents and she sees her family as being very supportive. She is driven to complete her PhD so that when the oldest

daughter starts school, she will be available to participate in her school life. She is aware of how difficult raising a family and studying could be; she saw her mother struggling to manage family, work and studies even in her 40s and 50s and thus says: *I have always wanted to study and finish, then focus on my family after, not do it the way my mother did.*

### **Moleboheng**

Born in Lindley, a small rural town in the Free State, Moleboheng went to both primary and high school within her home town. She is the last born child in a family of five children. At 27, Moleboheng is the first in her family to attend university. She was raised by a single parent (mother) who had never worked due to a disability, and she has never known her father. She clarifies: *My mother never worked, she has been paralysed her whole life, she got a pension grant.* It was through this grant that her mother was able to raise all her children. Yet, she does not see her disadvantaged background as a hindrance to achieving her goals. Although she never saw herself ever coming to university due to her family's circumstances, dreaming big enabled her to be where she is today: *Going to varsity was never on my mind, it was something that I couldn't do, because for me it was like a farfetched thing, but, so that's when I started thinking that if I don't do this for myself then no one is going to, that's when I started looking for information, I started finding out about loans.* Her siblings had to seek jobs once they completed matric as they had to assist their mother in providing for the family.

Moleboheng did not do well in her matric examinations in 2003 and had to upgrade her marks at a Further Education and Training (FET) institution. She explains that it was not easy, considering that her mother now also had to pay her fees: *Obviously when I was doing the upgrading my mother was still helping me with everything, it was tough but then she made it possible for me, she just wanted the best for me.* Her mother was not educated, but wanted her children to be educated. Her mother was her pillar of strength. She passed at the FET and applied to study at university. She adds: *Then after that I applied for a loan and that's when everything started, and I got a loan that I studied from it until I finished my degree, and then after that starting honours that's when I started using NRF<sup>2</sup> and it has been very helpful for me.*

Currently, Moleboheng is not married and has no children. She completed a BSc degree, and adds that she fell in love with physics. Though she initially wanted to study medicine at the University of Cape Town, she did not succeed due to financial constraints. She then enrolled at the UFS (QwaQwa campus) as it was closer to home, and describes her

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<sup>2</sup> National Research Foundation: one of the initiatives in South Africa intended to encourage and fund doctoral student until completion, particularly the previously disadvantaged students.



experience at undergraduate level as *problem-solving*, by which she means that students followed a format of finding answers to questions while, in postgraduate studies, they did research which allowed them to start projects and were supervised on how to go about them. She excitedly says this made her love for physics grow as, at this level, one is only given one project to work on: *At the moment, we have those bulbs that emit only white light to give us energy into the households, so we have an opportunity to work on different colours that we can bring about those bulbs and at the same time save us energy. I am more interested in bringing change into the community in the sense that we can use practically. It's not about only the study and everything, so it's something that will also contribute into our country and also come up with different styles that we could use, for example; like the clothes that paramedics use, if you are aware of them during the day they are normal clothes, but at night are more shiny and yes, we working on products like that, trying to come up with more advanced things that we can use for helping in improving the lives of the community.*

Initially, she did not intend to continue her studies after honours, *then I decided, let me go for physics honours and after that I'm done. Yes, I thought I needed to work, and then again, at home, they were eager for me to work. But after honours I thought I was almost there, why not do master's.* She did not enrol for a master's programme immediately after completing her honours degree, as she did not have funds. She went to teach at a high school in her hometown (Lindley) for approximately eight months. Besides the need to find work and assist the family, her rural community back home did not understand why she still wanted to continue her studies. For those who would confront her, she had to answer to questions such as "aren't you going to be over qualified?" She mentions: *I think it's still, people still need to learn about things that are happening around education, it's a case that some of them still think that when you are done with Grade 12 you are done.*

After being awarded funding by the NRF, she was able to pursue her master's degree. During that time, she faced some personal difficulties: *The second year of master's when I was supposed to submit, I lost my mom. She always told me that whatever you want to do is highly up to you, and it depends on how determined you are and how bad you want it, and how far you would go, but obviously make sure that you do it the right way, you get it the right way, and on your way there you don't hurt anyone. The sky is the limit for you and you do as you want and everything will follow. If you're happy, I'm happy.* This statement provides a picture of her relationship with her mother and the kind of principles and morals she was raised with, which kept her motivated to study further. Besides her mother, she was highly motivated by *Dr Molapo* who was one of her lecturers at university. Dr Molapo was also a mother and a wife, and was able to obtain her doctorate in spite of her family

responsibilities. Moleboheng always thought *if she could do it while she is married with children, so can I. am not married, I don't have children, I don't have anybody who can tell me what to do at what time. So I felt, if she can do it, I can do it, I just have to be determined. This is what I want after all, so I need to be determined before everything can happen, before I can get married and before it gets complicated.* These two women seem to have made a significant impact on Moleboheng, specifically by portraying a strong character of resilience through hardship.

She transferred from QwaQwa to Bloemfontein (UFS main campus) to pursue her doctoral studies. She would have preferred to pursue her doctoral studies with a different institution, but she was on an NRF scholarship and was not aware that she had a choice to change universities. She explains that the reason for her change of campuses to pursue her doctorate as: *I felt I need to change environments, I needed to meet new people, and then I decided to come here.* More importantly, she states: *I was approached by a very good supervisor from UFS main campus, he is well known and he has a good background and I thought I needed someone who could mentor me further with this thing and I felt he was a good candidate for that and I was lucky he approached me.* She had always wanted to be a medical doctor and explains: *So I came here and I said, let me do PhD and I just want to change my title, I always wanted to be a doctor, so it was being a doctor in a different perspective. Ya, that's what I wanted to do.* She also wanted to make an impact in her community and saw during her master's that it was possible to do that through physics: *I felt if I could take it further, I could get something good out of it ... there have been different aspects in physics that could bring about change into our communities, into our world altogether. We working on products like that, trying to come up with more advanced things that we can use for helping in improving the lives of the community.*

On being a black woman in a white male-dominated department, she says: *We are about five, if not six, black women in the department, four PhDs and one master's student and the rest are males.* Even though Moleboheng does not mention the total number of all PhD students, feels she receives equal treatment to that of men. She indicates: *We are not treated like we are women, we treated equally, we do different things but we are treated equally.* She adds that she feels free to voice her opinions and contribute to discussions, for instance, in their weekly meetings: *We don't feel that because I am a woman I can't say this. We are free to say whatever we want to, rise up ideas if we want to.*

However, on the issue of race, she states that there are instances when she still *feels she is black* because *there are situations where you find that being black is a bit disadvantageous.* Moleboheng explains that there are some things that are okay for white students to do, but

are not permitted for black people; however, she did not elaborate on this. She further mentions that *having a black supervisor that I'm working with has made things easy for me, and having studied at QwaQwa campus, being black or white has never been an issue. So for me here I don't feel it much that I am a black woman, so there are situations small that would make you feel you are disadvantaged as a black.* With regard to her supervisor, she adds: *Oh we have a good relationship, a very good one, he is very open and gives us a chance to do whatever we want and he is open for suggestions, always there for us ... he is more of a father than a supervisor..*

Having embarked on this doctoral journey, she admits that she has grown. *There are many things that I didn't understand on how they came about, like the project that I am doing, and now I have more understanding and I can be more depended on myself, because now it's more about what I want to do ... I identify what I want to do. My supervisor gave me the freedom of saying, choose a project for yourself, tell me what you want to do, give me the advantages and disadvantages, and tell me how you think we can turn the disadvantages into advantages. So that's where I started being on my own and saying, ok, I think this is how I should do it, this is how I should tackle this thing and by doing this, I am trying to achieve that, and by doing so, taught me to be upfront and be dependent on myself, and trust in myself as well.*

She has also presented her work in Russia and the USA, which has improved her confidence and presentation skills. *So it has taught me to stand up and do it and then say, this work that I am doing, nobody else knows it more than I do. You going to stand in front of them, tell them what you did and don't take what they say personally, take it as a learning curve, saying that, ok, he said this, so that means I have to do that. It's never about being personal, it's research and about learning, exploring that, ok, I didn't know that this could be done this way. In the presentation part it has helped me a lot, it has boosted my confidence.*

Pursuing a PhD has made her believe in her capabilities, especially when relatives said she was setting herself up for failure. She had to face some unsupportive relatives who openly said *the things that you want are impossible; to start with, you don't have money, and who is going to pay for you? You surely do not expect us to pay for you.* She then proudly replies saying that *I am where I am because worked hard, it's really heart-warming ... I don't feel threatened or shy to boast about it, and I do boast about it, whenever I am around, they will know that I am a doctor in the making.* She adds: *I feel important, and as people see your worth, even though at times it is difficult, you immediately remember that there are people looking out to me and I can't give up now, so it is really boosted me a lot.*

Recognition from her community and having a positive impact on women in previously male-dominated fields are important to her. *I wanna make a difference, I wanna put my town on the map and when they have to look back and check your background then people would be like, wow, you did well for yourself. Wherever you come from, whether you are from a rich background, you are come from single room; it all depends on where you want to see yourself. I always say that for our youth, in our life today, there is no reason not to study, there are funds, NRF gives bursaries, there are loans you can only pay once you have a job after completing your studies. They don't have excuses, they can't say "we couldn't do anything with our lives because we don't have funds," there is so much help out there.*

She describes her doctoral journey as fun, yet difficult but, more importantly, as a learning curve. The greatest challenge for her was dedicating a great amount of time to her work only to realise that she was on the wrong path: *There is a point where you work your heart out, you work the whole week, the whole weekend, and then there will come a point where you need to choose this equipment, and try and see the samples that you have characterised if you finally got what you looking for, only to find that you have worked all that week or two weeks and everything you did was wrong, you have to start over again. It's that thing of saying, what is it that I'm not doing right?* Despite the challenges, Moleboheng claims she would do it again if she had a chance, for herself and also for other women, to see, that even though physics is a male-dominated field, they have nothing to be scared of. She adds: *Everything is not guaranteed, but you can at least try and say, ok, I tried but then failed, but in my book there is no failure.*

### **Judy**

A national of Lesotho, Judy started her PhD when she was 36 and completed in 2012 at the age of 38. She is a single parent to two daughters, 16 and 9 years old. She completed her undergraduate degree at the National University of Lesotho, and taught as a secondary school teacher at a rural school in Lesotho. Judy describes herself as coming from a disadvantaged background. She secured a teaching job directly after completing her own high school despite not being qualified as a teacher. She needed to earn money to make a living, although she passed all her high school subjects with distinction. She explains: *You know, sometimes when you are from a disadvantaged background, where you don't have mentors, where you don't have people that provide you with career guidance, the only thing that you know, I think for most people, the only careers we knew we wanted to be a doctor, a teacher, and for some reason after, not after, before I enrolled at the University of Lesotho, I had completed what they call Grade 12 in here, and I didn't have anybody to guide me career-wise and I had to look for a part-time job somewhere and I landed in one school.*

One of the teachers she worked with enquired about her performance in high school and was surprised that Judy was not applying to any university or college to further her studies. This teacher (whom she regards as her *guardian angel*) went to the trouble of finding application forms and applied on behalf of Judy for a course in education and a bursary from the government of Lesotho, both of which were successful. Judy was the first in her family to go to university. She elaborates: *It is in that school that one teacher took interest in me, and went into inquiring about my results and why if I had failed to do supplementary (upgrade) courses, and she was surprised that I had not failed but actually had distinctions in every subject, but I was there.* She adds: *"I think that channelled me into teaching as a career, because that lady volunteered to get me university application forms, went even to National Manpower Development Secretariat (government of Lesotho bursaries) for my bursary, so it was like that channelled me into the career that she knew best and that's how I found myself in education.*

Judy sadly admits that the higher she pursued her studies, the more alienated she became from her family. Her family saw her as an *unapproachable person* who could no longer enjoy simple things in life. They felt she could no longer do the things that they used to do together, because people of her calibre lead a *high-class life*. She completed her honours and master's degrees at the UFS. While pursuing the master's programme, she joined the Grow Our Own Timber programme. She describes it as *a programme aimed at recruiting promising students to the academic world, somehow be moulded and recruited us to join academia*. This was a structured master's programme, advertised by the Faculty of Education, where *they (the department authorities) selected from a pool of promising students who were basically moulded to become lecturers in the faculty*. It is through this opportunity that she was, upon completion of the master's programme, absorbed into working at the UFS as a lecturer. Judy confesses, however, that *actually I think I like teaching more than lecturing, there are such a lot of challenges in academia, but it was one opportunity that I couldn't say no to.*

The circumstances of working as a lecturer within a department where she was the only black woman forced her to pursue a doctorate. *When I joined the UFS it became more of a need for me to study than a passion.* She did not have a pleasant experience with her master's as she *found it very difficult*. She elaborates: *My experiences since I came here were not pleasant, but I don't want to say because or for sure, that I am black and I am a woman, but sometimes I link them to my race and gender mostly because, up to now, I have a work relationship with my colleagues, not a personal one. I practically lock myself into my office and I think that is what I was coming to as well. What made it more difficult is the kind of relationship which still is the case, the kind of relationship I have with colleagues,*

*sometimes when you feel like you are stuck, you go to your colleagues but here they are the most unapproachable people. I don't know if I would ever have taken PhD if I was not been in academia. Venturing into PhD was something that was almost impossible for me, I think I struggled so much with master's degree, so much so that I felt studying ends with the master's.*

She emphasises the role that pride plays in one's life and how it can influence one's choices: *Although it is mostly work related, it again boils down to you and your pride, your sense of pride within your work environment. For me it is a sense of pride and a sense of feeling I belong, when you don't have a Dr at your door you feel like you don't belong, like you are not part of the institution. It's about who am I, how do I address myself, how do my colleagues address me, how do my students address me. So, you understand, it's all about sense of pride, it's all about feeling welcome in this place, feeling like you belong and feeling like you can add value, to this space and, so it's about pride, hence I ventured into PhD for both personal reasons and work-related reasons.*

Judy describes her PhD journey as the *loneliest, the most challenging, the most stressful* experience. Bearing in mind that her education had alienated her from her family and friends, she did not have any personal support structures, and colleagues at work were all concerned with their own studies. This was perpetuated by the fact that she and her colleagues only had professional relationships: *There was nobody to interact with, since most of us junior staff here are doing different topics, so I wouldn't go to my colleagues and tell them I am stuck, can you help me, because you do that you already disturb that person doing their work. Then you sit here and feel you don't want to continue, you feel this yoke; you don't talk to people though you are swimming in the same pool because you are doing different things. More like swimming in different waters. And at times, that we shouldn't forget it becomes an issue if no one comes to my office to ask me about something, so how do I move from my office to another person's office to ask? I think that sense of pride is always there, it always gets into the picture to say if I go there, it says maybe I am weaker than everybody else, it says I can't handle the pressure, so I have to show that I can handle the pressure.*

Judy says that she was overwhelmed by the intensity of work within her PhD and believes her master's programme did not prepare her in any way for such pressure. *Somehow you have this topic that you have thought about and you are the only person who has passion for this. So, what it means is that you are embarking on a journey that you alone are interested in, other people around you may not be interested, sometimes they don't even want to hear about it and you would be going on and on. So the literature searches, trying to understand*

*this topic, trying to frame the topic in the words that are acceptable, it is your own burden. It is your own battle, and sometimes, because the honours level for example, you sit around the table and talk about the stuff, and I think to some extent, I did a structured master's, somehow we were guided. The intensity of the work in PhD, I wasn't equipped to handle this kind of pressure, I was not prepared for this, as during the master's there is a community of colleagues that you work with. So with the PhD it was me and my supervisor and at times, often times she would say I should go and read. She describes her relationship with her supervisor, who was a colleague at the same time, as good, but when elaborating on her journey, it is evident that meeting only about work and getting feedback on her thesis did not define a good relationship: You know when your supervisor says "Judy, go and read," sometimes you became scared to even ask, how do I read, Prof, what are you expecting? You get out of the office confused, you are afraid, what you fear is that your supervisor might be thinking, is this woman going to make it?*

For Judy, it was impossible to separate her work from her doctoral studies, because she worked within the Faculty of Education while pursuing her PhD. Her supervisor was also a colleague, and some other colleagues were also enrolled for doctoral studies. As the only black female lecturer in the department, Judy sometimes felt she did not receive the support she needed: *But those are the people that you have to fear, you wish they couldn't know that you are having problems, you wish they couldn't know that this is steep road for you, you wish they would think you are sailing through. Because you know, they look at you through the glasses of race and immediately they do that, they feel you are inadequate, immediately when they look at you through those glasses, they feel you cannot make it because of your skin colour, I can't say of being female, but it was mostly of colour, race. Sometimes I used to sit in my office and thought, had this been a black man, would they have treated a black man like they did to me? I said no. Now that's how I justified putting gender into it and said if it were a black male sitting behind this desk, with his manhood which signifies power, to most people, I think my department would readily accept that he can offer something, but now here is a double-barrelled stereotype where they feel black and woman, she can't make it.*

Another challenge Judy faced was managing different roles, such as being a mother, a student and an employee. *There is a conflict between being a mother and doing PhD, that one definitely, let alone the fact that my daughter is a teenager, and teenagers need your time because sometimes things will happen just under your nose and you won't see them. The child will develop into something else that you don't like, and I can't say I don't feel that as well, I feel the effects of having done PhD while I had to look after my daughter growing up and wanting to share some of her experiences with me. It wasn't and still isn't a smooth*

*road with her because sometimes she would get so off, she would accuse me of ignoring them and neglecting them, at some point I would practically get to the house and walk into the house with my eyes already closed.*

Despite the hardships, Judy states that some positive factors came about from venturing into doctoral studies: *I evolved to be who I am today, how I had to rewrite my biography to come to the point where I am right now. I feel like I am somebody, I feel like I can stand in front of these people here, with my skin colour, with my gender and tell them something that I feel I know that they don't know, you understand. I feel like PhD helps you to negotiate your identity between being black and women and being an academic, because sometimes we come with our own biographies which are characterised by ideologies of weaknesses and say, I know I am black and weaker and they are stronger, I am black, I can't make it and they can. You know, you come up with a pre-written biography which you impose on yourself and other people around you impose on you and as you work through, it is a growth process, you grow as you go along and you end up re-writing the biography where you say I know I can.*

Judy's PhD experience has helped her to be assertive and to be able to critically analyse the work of other scholars. She states: *You know, in my own space, I argued and engaged in a debate with the authors and said I don't agree with Jansen here, for example, as I spoke to Crain Soudien in his absence through his writing, talked with Pillay through her studies. As I spoke to those people, sometimes I would be so upset and really question what they are saying and really question them. That made me grow to an extent, I didn't even think I would be where I am today, that interrogation, that questioning mood I think is that what I have here now.* Not only did she analyse other people's work, she even contacted those she felt she needed to confront: *I remember I wrote to two of them, the authors that I used, because somehow I felt upset, sometimes I wrote to Mamphela and asked her questions.* Thus, she felt confident that she could make a contribution in a discussion and not be intimidated by anyone's title. It is through this journey that she learned not to be emotional, but to confront issues through reason: *You don't let your anger speak, you let reason speak. Through the PhD process I have come to a stage where reason talks.*

Despite some challenges, Judy managed to complete her PhD. She says she just could not give up; she needed the people around her to respect her and she thought endurance would earn her that respect. *The load from the treatment at the faculty, they let me feel subordinate, they made me feel not intelligent, and this even went to the students, who felt because I am not a doctor, I don't know anything, that so and so is better than me because she is a doctor. But then as we engage in discussions with these people who thought they are beyond me knowledge-wise, who thought they are better because of their skin colour, I*



*realised I am functioning even at the higher level, regardless of their obtaining their PhD, I still perform better than them, I apply critical thinking and work better than them. She emphasises resilience and states that, as a black person, that ability is part of her: I got resilience, but I was resilient enough to know what I want, and not being able to give up, you know, when you are resilient you don't just give up. I think black people have that resilience character within them, I think they would haven't made it if it wasn't for that.*

### **Pinki**

Pinki (aged 28) is a South African and just completed her PhD. She is from Fouriesburg, a rural town in the Free State. Brought up in an extended family, she and her cousins were raised by her grandmother. Pinki mentions that, although her mother was still alive, she lived and worked in Johannesburg. She sent money home to assist her grandmother in taking care of all the children at home. Coming from a family where no one has been to university, she had full support from her family, because they all wanted her to make this opportunity a success. She explains: *In my family no one has reached where I am now, others have gone to colleges. I think again they wanted me to reach where they couldn't reach, hence very supportive.* Pinki was not married and had no children at the time she was interviewed. She was, however, in a new relationship.

Pinki's family was poor and she attended a township school. She managed to pass high school and qualify for university. She applied to the nearest university, being the UFS, QwaQwa campus. She did both her first degree and her honours at this campus, majoring in Chemistry and Physics. She wanted to be a medical doctor or radiographer when she was growing up, but unfortunately those disciplines were not offered at this campus. As a result, she enrolled for a degree in Chemistry. For her master's degree, she changed campuses and came to the main campus in Bloemfontein to continue studying Physics. The QwaQwa campus is a predominantly black campus and she struggled to adapt to the main campus. She explains: *Well initially it was kind of difficult, and moving from QwaQwa which is predominately black students, and when I came here I realised that here my white colleagues are at a higher level. I had to work very hard to be at their level, felt like I had to catch up, so I got a lot of pressure when I got here. When I got this side, most of the things were more advanced.*

She realised in the early stages of her academic career that Physics was a male-dominated field, which triggered her passion and love for this course even more. She found it a challenge and enjoyed being one of the few women in this field. *I think it was just a challenge that I wanted to take, and also again, people were getting inspired and they were*

*like, wow! You're studying physics and a lot of ladies don't do that.* Having completed her master's in physics, she then decided to venture into PhD studies.

She was convinced that she made a good decision studying a course that is not overpopulated by women, because this would give her more job opportunities. With all the gender equality strategies being implemented, women are absorbed into male-dominated areas. She states that *nowadays opportunities look into females more than males* in order to bridge the gap between men and women in the labour market. However, she still found the gender representation difficult to navigate: *I find it very challenging because even if, when you want to initiate something, it's not going to take off just like that as compared to when males suggested it. I think whatever we might come up with, is still a good thing, but just because the field is male dominated, it will still be perceived that the male has to be the one that is on top, it all depends on how courageous you are.* Another problem Pinki experienced was operating heavy equipment. She explains: *Sometimes it is heavy, hence challenging. In our department, we work with large equipment and sometimes we have to open it so that it analyses your sample and that's where we need manpower; we always rely on males to come and help us here and there.*

She also states that her lecturers were mainly men and that there are only two or three female lecturers currently in her department. This, she feels, is a hindrance, especially for female students. As much as male supervisors try to make female students feel they are a part of the team, female students always find it comforting with a female supervisor. *I was thinking maybe if you bounce your ideas to women lecturers and you are a woman, then there is a chance of them being noted and supported,* she explains. She adds that male supervisors like supervising female students, particularly in male-dominated departments, only because institutions are recommended to do as such, not necessarily because they want to do it.

In spite of these challenges, Pinki never felt like giving up. The only time she wanted to quit was at the beginning of the PhD programme when things did not go as she had anticipated. She explains: *In the beginning when the project was not starting, because we didn't have resources so I had to travel.* The project she was involved in required students to spend some time in South Korea, which put a great deal of strain on her because she was unsure whether she would be able to have financial assistance to pay for the trip: *I went to South Korea as part of my experimental requirement (practicals), so the process was stressing. We had to apply for funds and that waiting and not knowing when I am going to start with the project, really stressed me.* She has also been to Russia and Hong Kong for presentations and training in areas where her department lacked the equipment she needed for her work.

She values these experiences because they were not only educational, but also improved her confidence and presentation skills.

Despite being a reserved person, Pinki experienced growth due to the weekly peer group discussions they had in the department. A platform had been created for all students, as well as supervisors, to meet once a week and contribute constructively to the work of each student. Besides her passion for her work, this enabled her to complete her PhD. Acquiring and developing time management skills through her doctoral studies aided in developing her organisation skills and she made sure she followed her schedule. That made it possible for her to not just focus on her studies, but also take time off to visit her family and friends, who were her pillars of strength during her PhD. *If things arise that I must attend, I do make time, I can work to a certain level so that when that time comes I manage to go home.* However, Pinki often found it difficult to balance her studies and social life: *When you are doing research you just don't have a life, no social life, you just focus on the research and that puts strain on family and friends, you miss out on the life of your cousins if you have any.*

One factor that contributed positively to her studies was the fact that she stayed on campus and had access to the laboratories at any time. *Initially I was staying off campus, and in research you do experiments and have to be there until late, so I think staying on campus really helps. When you're on campus you can walk about because there is security.*

Pinki concludes by saying she intends to apply for a postdoctoral fellowship and will later consider starting a family of her own: *I think right now I just want to establish myself as a researcher, maybe give myself two to three years, then start a family.*

### **Kholu**

Kholu is a 34-year-old woman who comes from a family where both her parents are teachers. From an early age, Kholu knew that education is the key to a better future. Her parents made sure they provided all the support they could to ensure that she receives education. She states: *My parents are teachers and my dad actually made it to being a supervisor of schools, chosen by the department. I think they are both academically oriented and education is something that is very important to them, and I can say in my society education is very important.*

Kholu grew up in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape Province and attended a previous Model C school. She recalls that, on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebration, among other people invited, was Dr Radebe, a guest speaker to motivate the youth who attended her party. This female doctor made a great impact on her life: *She did social sciences and that was my major inspiration because she talked about social sciences and the way she was putting*

*things, you had to look at the world in a different way, and to me this was interesting because I never questioned anything, ok, I guess I questioned it, but I never put it within the framework of thinking about academia, and for me that was very interesting. I think maybe she was the one who made me think I wanted a PhD. Even today Dr Radebe is ploughing back to Sterkspruit in terms of indigenous knowledge systems.*

She was advised by her parents to apply to the UFS, which is far away from home, in order to enable her personal growth and independence. She holds all degrees from this university. She completed her undergraduate and honours degrees in sociology and her master's in gender studies. During her honours and master's degrees, she worked in the institution as a research assistant. She was funded by the NRF for her master's degree. After completing this degree, she decided to pursue a PhD, because she wanted to keep her part-time job and needed to be a registered student in order to be employed in that position. She feels her desperation to keep her employment was the wrong reason to register for a PhD: *I had told my supervisor even before I started that I was not ready, but then, if that's the only way I can be here and getting something regular, as in payment, then yes, I will do it. I am not an academic, but needed the job.* She has been enrolled for her PhD for seven years and have not completed. She received a permanent job offer as a lecturer within the gender studies department in 2010 and, as a result, the university pays for her doctoral studies. She was grateful at first, but with her slow progress she feels ashamed to be putting the institution's fees to bad use: *I feel guilty for not finishing this, so it's only now that I am thinking should I be looking for something else because I feel like I am burdening the university.*

As an employee and a student within the same institution, Kholu's doctoral study experiences are interwoven into her experiences of working within the institution. She has been pursuing a PhD but, due to a lack of enthusiasm for her studies, she concentrated more on her work. Kholu got married and experienced severe complications caused by an undiagnosed illness with her first pregnancy. *I think my illness was female related, I think that was one of my problems because I got pregnant, I had a health problem related to that and it took long to diagnose and it really affected my work. And because I wasn't fully employed, I didn't have medical aid and couldn't just go to hospital, I was just sick and was just lonely and I couldn't continue with anything.*

Following her own health issues, her supervisor, who was also a director within the department, fell ill and went on sick leave for a year. It was also during this time that her husband lost his job and Kholu, as a research assistant, had to be the sole provider. With her supervisor on sick leave and a new director at work, things changed dramatically; even more so when she became pregnant for the second time. Unlike the previous director, who

had compassion for expectant mothers, the new director did not have any for her. Falling ill again created more problems for her, and that resulted in her being excluded from receiving assignments that had earned her extra money. Kholu currently has three children. The third child is her late sister-in-law's, whom she and her husband adopted after the mother's death. Her husband only completed matric and comes from a family in which most members are not educated, except for a brother-in-law who has a degree. She talks about the unexpected strain her studies have caused in her family relationships: *But generally the family doesn't understand, my mother-in-law is a housewife, so my husband, I think, in his mind is looking for a housewife. But he does support me, it's just that he doesn't understand the weight that I am going through, but I guess he is still does have that thing that as a woman that studying is not what I am supposed to do. When I get home now though, I don't want to lie to you, he will wash the dishes when I wash the kids. He will iron, I will cook, but he does not get the gravity of what I do. Being a wife and a mother exerted more pressure on her: The progress is delayed in achieving one's studies when there are children and a husband to take care of, especially us as Africans. Our duty as women is to take care of the family. My husband helps out with chores in the house, but as a woman, I cannot always expect him to do everything and even if he did, you know how men do it, they are not as conscious as us women.*

Regarding her studies, being female has never been an obstacle, because her relationship with her supervisor was very good; though short lived due to his illness. *I think in my situation they do need me, as a black woman. I don't find problems with regards to being a woman, but more on being black. And maybe, on being a woman it's because I am having health problems but it's never something that is spoken of. I know that my supervisor is very supportive, very supportive in terms of gender issues, when one is pregnant he is very understanding and is willing to take you to another level. So in terms of that, I don't think there is a problem.* She then had another supervisor and with him things, were not the same. *We don't understand each other. He will give me concepts and to me it doesn't talk to me, it's not practical and I can't see how I write it up. It doesn't seem to come together with what I want to write in the chapter. I am reading, but they don't link or I don't see that link where they come together.* Moreover, being black within her work environment has not been a pleasant experience. With the newly appointed director, things changed for the worse. She argues: *I am the only black woman and two white ladies in the same position as me. The new director was not including us blacks in decision making and in projects, so the way things go here is that the project comes in through the director and the director must distribute and we will be told what to do. He will then say, oh by the way, you are also here, maybe you can be involved.*

Another challenge Kholu faces is that there is no postgraduate community in which she can share ideas or discuss issues. *I would go to other ladies like, this lady who just started her PhD, started it last year, went to her, I just wanted to talk to all black females to find out can't we start something, so that they can look at my stuff. But I never got that kind of concrete support. So I don't have that support.*

Despite the long journey which seems to have no ending in the near future, Kholu states that she has acquired research skills, reading and writing skills, as well as computer skills. She affirms that, through this doctoral journey, though she has presented at only one conference, she is confident she can start some research projects on her own. Thus, she intends on starting her own research company should she decide to quit or should the university withdraw funding her studies. *I have learned to say my challenges are what will teach me, what will make me stronger. So in everything I take a lesson. There might be a challenge in finishing, the rector might say it's too long, but I am ready for anything, I am fine. If I don't finish it, I will still find something to do, I will be able to stand on my own; hence it's a positive. It's a challenge now and I am not sure where I am or where I am going but it made me grow. I don't regret of any that I have gone through.*

Having a supportive family, especially her parents and her husband, as well as her faith, has helped her to endure these hardships. However, her doctoral journey has not been anything she had thought it would be; trying to manage work and family, proved to be no smooth ride. She attributes her endurance to her faith and parents: *I am a Christian and those values kept me going, and my parents also. They still expect me to do this and finish, especially my mother, she would love me to finish. And so I guess those push me, and I can't give up, I was thinking last year maybe I should move on and thought if I move on maybe I will get back to PhD, then I would do it later, and that is my Christian life that made me stand. I cannot be swaying, I have to stand firm.*

### **Palesa**

Palesa is a 38-year-old divorcee who has four children. Her children are staying with her mother in Welkom, who oftentimes had to provide for them with her pension grant while Palesa studies in Bloemfontein. She comes from a big family with sisters and brothers who are married and taking care of their own families; thus, they are not able to assist her financially. She states: *As a divorcee you are no longer a responsibility to your parents, they no longer count you as their own responsibility ... I do have brothers and sisters, but they also have their families, and people who never took care of you before, it becomes very difficult for them to include you in their budget.* She went through the former Bantu education

system and adds that she wanted to be a medical doctor, but things did not work out as she had hoped: *The problem was that when you finished the matric, the results didn't allow one to go into studying medicine. I had passed well, but not that well to make it in medicine, that's why I got admission in the historically black university.* She studied BSc for her first degree and decided not to continue with an honours degree, but instead pursued a postgraduate diploma in education (PGCE), which was also referred to as a higher education diploma in teaching (HEDT). The reason for this transition was because being a teacher would secure her employment, compared to only doing sciences, especially a BSc degree: *I did HEDT for security. For us black women, if we talk of women specifically, the jobs that are available and fast to get is teaching. That's what people used to say, that's why I did HEDT because people used to say you cannot be or do much with a BSc qualification alone.*

Upon completing her diploma, Palesa furthered her studies and pursued a master's degree in Applied Tradition (Physics). *I got a scholarship to go study in North West in Mafikeng, in this project, it was a two year project. First year you do course work and then the second you go to a company.* At that time, science companies recruited students who were still studying, funded their studies, and then absorbed them into the labour market. *The project that I am talking about was that which South Africa wanted to generate electricity using nuclear power, so they never felt it was safe to operate and went bankrupt, hence they closed.* Even though the company went bankrupt even before she could start working, this experience had introduced her to the world of research.

Palesa went to teach for five years in a high school in Welkom and another five years in KwaZulu Natal. During this time, she got divorced. She hated being a teacher and that urged her to pursue a PhD, which was not a difficult decision to make, as she explains: *I have always wanted to be highly educated, to reach a point of PhD; it has always been my dream.* She placed her application with the UFS and was funded by the NRF to study. She chose to study at the UFS because it was closer to home and she could often visit her children.

Regarding her experience of the doctoral journey as a woman, Palesa states that *the fact that you are a woman always appears to be an obstacle in your achievements. When you are a woman, people consider you subordinate to your male counterparts. We as women are more vulnerable, and you know how a vulnerable person is. Our nature as women makes us vulnerable, for the mere fact that when I get there people see a woman and that makes me less of a person, people just see that I belong in the home, taking care of the husband, that's what comes to mind to people before they can even know what I am capable of doing as a person. When we are at a work place, I wish people wouldn't look at me like that, as a*

woman, but see a colleague. She further elaborates that being a woman within a male-dominated discipline brought forth setbacks in her journey. She explains that men tend to see women as sexual objects and it is difficult for her to ask men for help out of fear of it being misunderstood as a sexual advance: *So why when as a woman I ask for help, there has to be something that I provide. Not all of them are like that though, it's about being a woman versus man, there are things that require strength, manual labour and we need men's assistance. There are times when I wish I were a man.*

Palesa emphasises that race will always be a problem, especially at the UFS. She regards the institution as a *home for the white* and strongly believes that black people should have their own universities, sponsored by black people, which will then make it a home for them: *At UFS colour will always be an issue, transformation doesn't take place within a day, that will remain a fact, and this is their home which they have established for themselves. So it doesn't mean the whites are that bad, it's just that they feel they need to protect what "belongs" to them. I won't fight for resources with the white people; we have black rich people like Kgosi (prominent South African rich black man). Why doesn't he take his money and invest it in historically black institutions, and then make it a home for the blacks, as much as the white have their homes? So I won't fight, because honestly the white people grow up knowing that this is their home. Rather what we need to do as black is make a home of our own where the whites also cannot feel at home.*

She further says that black people discriminate against one another. Those who succeeded in academics do not want to share their road to success with the upcoming scholars: *Black people have a problem of looking up to the white, when he says, well done, that's the only time I think I have done well. We lack that self-motivation to know we have done well even when no one acknowledges. So we are still mentally blocked, colour is an issue yes, but as black women we have problems in our own minds. We have been perceived as the less intelligent people for the longest time, courses such as sciences, we didn't do, so it is not possible to change overnight.* She explains that the discrimination between black people could be perpetuated by compromised principles in achieving one's goals; what people went through to get to where they are: *You know what makes them keep the knowledge to themselves, sometimes it's because of the way they achieved their goals. If I, for one, finally make it and I have compromised some principles along the way, then I will not want to share my ways.*

Palesa mentions that she has grown through the doctoral journey, because she was expected to write and analyse critically. She can now write some work by herself from the beginning to the end, and she proudly expresses: *At this level they expect you to present*



*and write papers, and those are subject to corrections. I believe I can write alone and finish and that did not happen before I got to this level. I have seen through helping other students that I know what I am doing; I am able to see gaps that I didn't see while at master's level. That is a sign of growth.* She adds that she has also managed to operate equipment by herself: *I am able to use the machines by myself, I used to fear those big machines, but now I start the machine and continue until completion.*

In addition to the ill treatment by male colleagues and the difficulties in operating the equipment, Palesa is saddened by being away from her children and missing important events in their lives: *A mother should always be there for growing kids, a mother should always be there. My first born was attending a prize giving yesterday, she was supposed to choose what career she follows, but because of this work I couldn't attend. I asked the teacher if she can be excused as I am not there, but the teacher refused. Imagine other children with their parents and mine appearing all alone? Fortunately she understands, but my biggest wish is that they were here with me.*

For Palesa, all these other challenges are bearable, except for a lack of funding: *Funding is the biggest problem. At my department, resources aren't available. A student can't learn on an empty stomach. From my side funding is the biggest challenge. One thing is staying off campus, I tried to apply but they wanted me to share and I can't share; besides I should be staying with my kids not sharing with another student. I am old and doing a PhD, but that Indian woman wanted me to share. Where I am staying right now, it is a commune and I stay in the back room, my children can visit. But there are laws that one shouldn't have visitors.* However, Palesa adds: *But I still strongly believe that what has kept me going is the fact that I am matured and also I have daughters.*

She argues that she continued with the journey due to motivation from friends who confronted her by saying that they looked up to her. *Others come to me, believe me, they say, we salute you! Like this woman who studies through getting encouragement from me, though her background is not as bad as mine, she is one of the people who got strength through seeing me. There is one man whom we went to varsity with but dropped out, he came to study here and every time he sees me he says he is struck by my strength because this journey isn't easy, saying he doesn't know where I get my strength, and to tell you the truth I don't have the strength, but I see myself going on.*

### **Belinda**

A Ghanaian, at 32 years of age, Belinda is the first of four siblings, of which the last two have been adopted. She comes from a family where both parents had received formal education; she finds them very supportive in her educational journey. Her biological sister had just

completed her first degree and was thinking of pursuing a master's degree, while her other sister is a nurse, who still intends to study further. Her brother is enrolled for his second year at a university in Ghana. Belinda is not married and does not have children. She considers herself fortunate for being single, because having a family brings forth responsibilities: *Sometimes, some of the roles assigned, for example in marriage. For now I feel fortunate that I am not married, if I were married it would be different, I would have to take into consideration my family. This isn't my experience, but I have a friend who is doing PhD, and the husband had to relocate, mind you they have a child, so she had been away from her family for some time. All those roles delayed her work by a year, I was talking to her and she was telling me how much and what she had to do to even submit a year later. So the family plays a big role.*

She started her PhD in Human Nutrition at the age of 28, and was in her fourth year at the time of the interview, which she believed was her last year in doctoral studies. She had anticipated completing her studies within the minimum time, especially because she is studying full-time. However, she and her supervisor decided she must continue into the fourth year as this last year would add essential elements to her study: *We extended the number of observations, we wanted to end at three months after intervention, but we had some presentations around and are convinced that if we add another two months of observation we could get better results. But some will be not be used for school work, some will be used for school work, otherwise we will have a big book to present.* Even though it was for a good reason that she extended the number of observations, this depressed her so much that, for the first time during her doctoral journey, she felt like quitting. She recalls: *I wasn't so happy. When I came to UFS for the third year, I was hoping that I will be able to submit in June latest, then we discussed with my supervisor, I felt I was not going to finish, for the whole week I was depressed. I am one person, when I talk about my work, it's like I am talking about my husband, or a guy I just met, but the whole week because of that I didn't do anything productive, I felt demotivated that I had to register for the fourth year, I had conditioned my mind that working full-time, I should be able to do it within the minimum time. That was the only time I felt a bit down. My supervisor came to visit me in my room and was asking how I was doing and I told her I haven't been able to do anything for a couple of days and she said, yes, you need to rest for some time and come back and try to do something again, but after some time I went past that stage.*

Belinda did her first degree as well as her master's in Ghana. She only came to South Africa to pursue her doctoral studies in Human Nutrition. *I did my first degree in Ghana with the University for Development Studies, and I did the second degree in Ghana as well, but at the University of Ghana, and then I came to UFS for the PhD. I did first degree which was on*

*Community Nutrition and Rural Development, but then the course was Community Nutrition, but the main components were rural development and community. Then I did Human Nutrition for both master's and still continued into PhD. Now I am looking at human nutrition which is supposed to be more scientific and clinically based, but I have added part of public health because of the way I designed my study, it is still very much related.*

Finding work within a university (back in Ghana) prompted Belinda to consider furthering her studies, more so because she enjoyed the nature of the work she did, which was research. She states: *After my master's degree I got to be part of a project that was running in my department. I left that project and went into another project run by the university. So I came back to school from the university working environment.* Another reason for pursuing doctoral studies was because of the realisation that most professors within her university in Ghana were old, and she decided she wanted to be a professor before the age of 40.

Gendered roles played an essential role in Belinda's life through societal expectations that pressurised her and her family: *Because of my background, I have parents who are formally educated, so that is an advantage for me. They encourage HE, but they get so worried because of what others are saying about HE. Recently when I came home, my mother was asking how I was doing academically, but also said that while I am still studying I should look at the marriage aspect of my life. So, sometimes it's not them, but the society puts pressure on them which they bring forth to me, because it is believed that at a certain age one has to be married with kids.* Belinda believes that, when one pursues HE, people's perceptions about you change: *There are also others who expect you, I don't know if I should call it an expectation or a test, because they are going to test you to see whether you are going to be arrogant or submissive as they expect a woman to be ... so nowadays you greet us from a distance, initially you would greet them from a distance, it wouldn't matter, but now that we are in HE they look or scrutinise one's behaviour, some normal behaviour is no longer normal. They say PhD is the one changing people, like they are no longer approachable.* For her, however, these societal expectations have not had a huge impact on her academic performance, which she attributes to her being self-motivated. *That hasn't impacted much on my studies because I am self-motivated, because I think that people will always judge you at the end of the day. When you are not hurting anybody and what you do is going to help you and develop you; then do it. It's all about self-motivation and you need that a lot, because those people that you need encouragement from might not even be there, so you need to be motivated yourself; besides, you do it for yourself not anyone else.*

She continues to say that being an educated woman in her society is still seen as being unruly because women are expected, to a large extent, to be homemakers: *It's not a good*

perception of women pursuing HE. People think that women studying to that level think less of the social aspect of life, you are all about the academics, women in HE are difficult. Most people don't want to marry women in higher education, they think they are too much to handle and they think you are never there and they need people to be homemakers and this is a woman who runs from one conference to the other. They are not good in terms of choice in marriage material, that's the perception people have. There are quite a few people growing up who are seeing that the world has become globalised and it would be good to have someone who is educated who equally earns and who helps support, there are people who don't mind, I have friends who have lost partners, whether husbands or boyfriends because of this, so this is the kind of setting.

Belinda argues that, although she has not personally experienced direct racism at UFS, she believes that South Africa categorises people's behaviour by their skin colour. By this, she explains that a wrong act is condoned when conducted by white people: *In Ghana we don't colour code things, so if something has been done wrong, it's because someone did something wrong, not that it is wrong because it is done by a black or a white person. When I first came to UFS, I must say, I had a very difficult time, because I see people doing good, doing bad, helpful or otherwise, but I realised because of the history, and I understand that, but we colour code everything and we make some people get away with certain things. I don't really have an example, but people get away with things because they hide behind colour. People in the department are very helpful, and I haven't experienced that. I still have bed linen from my department secretary who is white, who bought me the pair when I first arrived in Bloemfontein. They were really helpful.*

Belinda's family and boyfriend, who also completed a PhD, support her through her journey. She elaborates: *I actually lost my (previous) boyfriend over my PhD ... I have found somebody and we are trying to get to know each other. I met somebody when we were in undergraduate and I finished my master's, then I said I want to be academia and I worked around university for some time and I wanted to get back to school and an opportunity presented itself and went back. Initially he seemed supportive, and quite some time into the PhD he started asking will I ever be around, have time for me, you are moving too fast, I want us to walk in life together and you seem to be running, things like that which impacted negatively on our relationship. We broke up a year into my PhD.*

As mentioned above, she attributes much of her success to being self-motivated: *For me, what has been the driving force, the zeal to finish something that I started, not all people have that, once I start something, I have to finish it. Some people don't have the strength to do that; once they encounter challenges they give up.* She further states that she has a very

good relationship with her supervisor and that the supervisor cares beyond her academic work: *I think it's very cordial, I always tease that my supervisor is one of the coolest supervisors because I chose to do my study in Ghana and I have spent half of the three years in Ghana, half of those in UFS, so we had to come up with very interesting, should I say, catchy ways of communicating, advanced ways of communicating so that we don't feel the distance so much. She has been very nice, we are on WhatsApp (social media) together, we used to Skype, though it has not been working very well these days. She encourages me, even beyond my school work, shows concern beyond my school work. I feel very comfortable working with her. She also attributes her success to her mother who encourages her, as well as her faith in God: I am a bit religious, so I pray, I listen to music a lot. My mom has been my great motivator as well. When I call she would remind me where I said I was going, you want to finish school quickly and do all the things you want and so on.*

She points out that funding is a major problem. With much appreciation, she mentions that she is one of only a few government-sponsored students and, thus, feels the need to give back to her home country, which she is doing through her research: *I am lucky to be one of the few people who is sponsored by the government of Ghana, so that is one of the main reasons why I wanted to, it wasn't mandatory, but I felt it would be like giving back to my people when I do research in Ghana.* The problem with her funding, however, is the process delays, which makes life difficult for her. However, she has started receiving a living allowance at the beginning of the year, and that amount has helped her in times when she needed pre-financing before the funding came through: *The funding delays a lot, and most of the things I have to do, like collecting data, even the department has approved your studies, when the money takes long, then you have to pre-finance and when I don't have a choice I use my living amount. I can't say it is sufficient because before they pay, I struggle. They give living expense once a year, I saved my living expenses as much as I could, and that's what I use when they delay. It's more of a self-management. I always joke after completion they also need to give me a diploma in financial management.* In this regard, she states that the UFS is failing to create employment for the PhD students, which could supplement inadequate funding and reduce financial problems for students. Furthermore, creating employment could also assist in giving the students exposure or experience: *One of the things I realised we don't have at UFS is the exposure to practice. I have heard other people in other universities, they have opportunities to teach, to do research and other things, sometimes this also helps them to keep going, either financially or improving their CVs. I did have that experience for one semester, I feel it should be part of the study, the curriculum, the heart of the study that at PhD a student is given work or an expose to do work. This shouldn't be free, students should be paid to do that, seriously, at this age when*

*you are a full-time student you are not working elsewhere while you still have responsibilities, research experience, teaching and projects. I think UFS has a lot of advanced facilities compared to where I come from but what we don't have is enough offices for postgraduate students. Sometimes people need to be in that formal environment to do a lot. Initially when I came I had an office, but later on my department had to take in some more staff, I had to vacate the office, I used to work from my room in residences and it is not conducive.* She illustrates by saying that, while she works during the day, a cleaner would come to clean the room and she would have to stop her work, which compromises the flow of writing.

Despite all the ups and downs, Belinda happily exclaims that she has developed a great deal through this journey. She is analytical and, due to conferences she has attended in countries such as Nigeria and Germany, her presentations skills have grown. She states that it was humbling to meet the scholars she read while doing her research, particularly because those that she interacted with listened attentively to what she had to say and did not make her feel incompetent: *I think it is more humbling than a skill, yes your presentation skills definitely improve, you go out there and people critique your work, and you are forced to be confident in what you do, you develop, but it is also humbling at the same time, because you will meet people that you read about, and these are very simple people and you could actually talk to them and they believe you are making sense, it builds your confidence. It is a kind of an affirmation or confirmation that you are doing something right.*

In summary, all participants showed hunger and determination in furthering their studies to the doctoral level. They all, at some point, gave up their jobs in order to study; for example, even Khanya who was not a full-time student had to resign from the private sector and find a job in a government department, because she realised that it was impossible for her to study while working in the private sector with its hectic work load. However, all participants had different reasons that motivated them to pursue their doctoral studies, which ranged from intrinsic to instrumental. For one participant, it was pointless to study until master's level and not to continue to PhD. Also, enjoying their work at master's level ignited the fire to continue with their doctoral studies.

## **Findings and discussion**

This section will report the findings drawn from the biographical narratives above and will discuss them according to the four research questions that framed the in-depth interviews: (1) In what ways are black women's experiences of doctoral studies shaped by gender? (2) What role does race play in being a black woman in PhD studies? (3) What enables these

women to strive for and reach what they value? (capabilities), and (4) Which challenges and obstacles do the women face in pursuing a PhD?

*1. In what ways are black women's experiences of doctoral studies shaped by gender?*

The participants' experience of gender in their doctoral studies was found to be influenced mainly by social roles and expectations. Some participants ventured into doctoral studies because they saw opportunities for black women in white male-dominated fields, for example, the natural sciences. They also realised that not many women hold management positions and this challenged them to pursue doctoral studies in order to qualify for such positions. Another factor that influenced their choice to pursue doctoral studies for some participants was having female role models who hold doctoral degrees. Lastly, most participants experienced gender discrimination, particularly in the male-dominated fields of study. Also, those who worked and studied at the same time claimed to have experienced gender inequality within their departments. These experiences will be discussed separately.

*1.1. Societal roles and gendered expectations*

Two of the seven women stated that women, by nature, are the caretakers of the family. One of them attested that it made women vulnerable to discrimination from male colleagues. However, all women emphasised how society expects women to be homemakers. Most women also found it difficult to balance their studies with their home life.

*I say we as women are more vulnerable, and you know how a vulnerable person is. Our nature as women makes us vulnerable, for the mere fact that when I get there people see a woman makes me less of a person, people just see that I belong in the home taking care of the husband, that's what comes to mind to people before they can even know what I am capable of doing as a person. I drew myself a schedule whereby I work hard during the day because my partner didn't like me working at night and wasn't willing to compromise my relationship. (Palesa)*

*I would say since as a woman, society has groomed us into nurturing more than making money. I think my husband, in his mind is looking for a housewife. But he does support me, it's just that he doesn't understand the weight that I am going through, but I guess he still does have that thing that as a woman that is not supposed to be working. When I get home now though, I don't want to lie to you, he will wash the dishes when I wash the kids. He will iron, I will cook, but he does not get the gravity of what I do and for now I had to concentrate on the family. My husband helps out with chores in the house, but as a woman, I cannot*

*always expect him to do everything and even if he did, you know how men do it, they are not as conscious as us women. (Kholu)*

*And I would tell everybody that wants to do PhD that balancing work issues or PhD with family issues, it's not a child's play. So that is the burden that as women also we carry, because I think if it was a man, a man doesn't care, a man can get out of the house and spend the whole day and the night, go back at three o'clock to just bath and come to work. I am telling you, for some reason even kids have been socialised to believe that we are nurturers, so if it's the father doing that, it's fine, and they will even say so, mama if daddy doesn't work, what are we going to eat, so nature or is it the society that socialises them to believe that my mother has to take care of me or that my mother has to be there and the minute you falter you are done. (Judy)*

*The society puts pressure on them (her parents) which they bring forth to me, because it is believed that at a certain age one has to be married with kids, and there are also others who expect you, I don't know if I should call it an expectation or a test, because they are going to test you to see whether you are going to be arrogant or submissive as they expect a woman to be. There are other people who also think I am a woman, why don't you just end at master's level? They think we are "too much" especially those that are not married and are without kids, especially with other family members, it's like we are wasting. The society I come from does not have a good perception of women pursuing higher education, people think that women studying to that level think less of the social aspect of life, that they are all about the academics, women in higher education are difficult, most people don't want to marry women in higher education, they think they are too much to handle and they think you are never there and they need people to be home makers and this is a woman who runs from on conference to the other, they are not good in terms of choice in marriage material, that's the perception people have. (Belinda)*

*At times he feels I'm putting my career before him, which is true, it's a given, my career comes first, and then he will come after. If I were to concentrate on him and leave my career I am not guaranteed that he will stay forever. There is no such thing as forever in relationships these days, so yes, he feels abandoned at times but I do my best to make him feel special. (Moleboheng)*

In relation to balancing family life and academic work, most participants indicated that they experienced conflict, which made life stressful. Those who did not have families of their own also believed themselves to be fortunate not to have the added stress.



*I need to be determined before everything can happen, before I can get married, before it gets complicated. (Moleboheng)*

*I feel fortunate that I am not married. If I were married it would be different, I would have to take into consideration my family. This isn't my experience, but I have a friend who is doing PhD, and the husband had to relocate, mind you they have a child, so she had been away from her family for some time. All those roles delayed her work by a year, I was talking to her and she was telling me how much and what she had to do to even submit a year later. So the family plays a big role. (Belinda)*

*I thought I would have my PhD before I get married and have children, but then I had to go through that sick process and I actually got married and had other children and that really messed up my PhD. Progress is delayed in achieving one's studies when there is children and a husband to take care of, especially us as Africans. Our duty as women is to take care of the family. My husband helps out with chores in the house, but as a woman, I cannot always expect him to do everything and even if he did, you know how men do it, they are not as conscious as us women. (Kholu)*

*There is a conflict between being a mother and doing PhD, that one definitely, let alone the fact that my daughter is a teenager, and teenagers need your time because sometimes things will happen just under your nose and you won't see them. The child will develop into something else that you don't like, and I can't say I don't feel that as well, I feel the effects of having done PhD while I had to look after my daughter growing up and wanting to share some of her experiences with me. And I would tell everybody that wants to do PhD that balancing work issues or PhD with family issues, it's not a child's play. So that is the burden that as women also we carry, because I think a man doesn't care as a woman does, a man can get out of the house and spend the whole day and the night, go back at three o'clock to just bath and come to work. I tell you, for some reason even kids have been socialised to believe that we are nurturers, so if it's the father doing that, it's fine, and they will even say so, mama if daddy doesn't work, what are we going to eat, so nature or is it the society that socialises them to believe that my mother has to take care of me or that my mother has to be there and the minute you falter you are done, and I know I will regret doing my PhD because my kids are abandoned somewhere, I will regret that sometime, I cannot say I don't feel it, I feel it because I fight with my daughter everyday on behaviour wise, I think she just respects me by not saying where were you when I needed you, I am coping with life the way I know how, it has made holes in the relationship with my daughter, and I just hope I am able to mend those broken relationship because I just can't bear having lost my friends and losing my family. (Judy)*

*I am a mother of four children and they are far from me, and sometimes they really need me and if my children need my time, I just go, I don't care what point or stage I am at with my work, I just pack and leave. A mother should always be there for growing kids, a mother should always be there. (Palesa)*

*I have been academically interested in academics, also my family background, I think I can say my mother is an academic to some extent, I would think, because she studied even in her 40s and 50s, so I have always wanted to study and finish, then focus on my family after, not do it the way my mother did, but I always wanted to go further with my studies. (Khanya)*

### **1.2. Opportunities for women**

While articulating their experiences of doctoral studies as women, most participants explained that they saw the opportunities of undertaking doctoral studies even before they registered. This was due to the fact that they were not satisfied with the positions they held at the workplace. They also identified the shortage of women in managerial positions, which led to the assumption that, in order to be a woman in a managerial position, one had to have the necessary qualifications.

*When I was in the private sector, I realised that there was potential for women to move up, I got exposed to women in senior positions, but they had to have certain degrees and qualifications to be there. So when I got there I realise that we run short of people to fill in the managerial positions, even though I had decided to do MBA while at still in private sector, but at that level, I decided I might as well do my PhD in management instead of going back to dietetics, my junior degree, as there seems to be more potential. (Khanya)*

*Nowadays opportunities look into females more than males, I think actually from third year there were no females in physics, like in my class, there were only two ladies while the rest is males, so it takes more courage to be in a male-dominated environment. (Pinki)*

*As I joined the UFS it [PhD] became more of a need for me than passion for studying ... but for me is a sense of pride and a sense of feeling I belong, when you don't have a Dr at your door, you feel like you don't belong, like you are not part of the institution. It's about who am I, how do I address myself, how do my colleagues address me, how do my students address me, so you understand it's all about sense of pride, it's all about feeling welcome in this place, feeling like you belong and feeling like you can add value, to this space. (Judy)*

### **1.3. Having and being black female role models**

Most women were influenced greatly by other black women in their lives, be it a mother, a teacher or a motivational speaker. Some women also felt responsible for being a role model to their daughters, friends and community.

Moleboheng attributed her pursuit of doctoral studies to her lecturer who was a female and balanced family life and studying at the same time. She mentioned that her lecturer was a strong motivation that made her realise she as a young women, with no family responsibilities yet, can attain her goal if she were determined and willing to work hard. She also acknowledged that her mother's support and love challenged her to pursue doctoral studies because her mother always said that whatever she wants to achieve, she can achieve. She also emphasised that integrity should always be an important factor in how and what one does to attain one's dream.

Kholu, on the other hand, attributed her motivation to pursue doctoral studies to a family friend, Dr Radebe, who holds a doctorate. She claimed that she became aware of her passion to achieve this dream at her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebration during a motivational speech by Dr Radebe. Dr Radebe's passion for the social sciences inspired her to experience it for herself.

Judy, who had no intentions of studying any further than matric due to lack of knowledge of HE, was grateful to a colleague whom she met at her first job as a teacher. Had it not been for this colleague's interest in her life, Judy would have probably stayed a teacher without knowing that her exceptional matric results qualified her for university entry.

Palesa, on the other hand, has encouraged other women, as well as her daughters, to study further by setting an example.

*My friend is married and has three children, she has registered in M.Sc., just started with it this year, and she was encouraged by my studying. She further pointed out: I still strongly believe that what has kept me going is the fact that I am matured and also I have daughters and I think of them about what challenges will they be faced with when they come to university. My first daughter is doing very well in school, she is a top achiever right now, and I ask her how she got her achievements, by that I need her to know the only way out is to study hard in order to achieve, not to copy or even make her way through sex. I tell her you just can't bring something home without telling me where it comes from; parents don't ask where the children get things from when they don't have jobs. By this I am saying I have started telling my child that she has to work hard for her achievements, when she was still growing she used to depend on me for homework and I had to train her to be independent.*

#### 1.4. Gender inequality

Most of the participants indicated that being a woman within their disciplines (particularly those within the physics departments) made them vulnerable to discrimination. The two that did not experience discrimination were the ones who said that they had good supervisor–student relationships and were not employed at the university. Those who worked and studied in university departments claimed that they felt discriminated against, but more specifically as employees and not as students.

*I find it very challenging because even when you want to initiate something, it's not going to take off just like that as compared to when males suggested it. I think whatever we might come up with, is still a good thing, but just because the field is male dominated, it will still be perceived that the male has to be the one that is on top, it all depends on how courageous you are. I think actually from third year there were no females in Physics, like in my class there were only two ladies while the rest is males. So it takes more courage to be in a male-dominated environment. (Pinki)*

*The fact that you are a woman always appears to be an obstacle in your achievements. When you are a woman, many people consider you subordinate to your male counterpart. (Palesa)*

Some of the participants experienced gender inequalities in their workplace. Judy indicated that being black and a woman in her department exposed her to being a gender inequalities victim. She reported that if she were a black man, she would not have received the bad treatment from some of her colleagues. She reasoned that, though black, a man still receives and commands respect. She strongly claimed that she was vulnerable to discrimination as a result of her colleagues' *double-barrelled stereotype* that a black woman is unable to perform well.

Khanya indicated that gender inequalities are, at times, perpetuated by women themselves. For instance, she reported that in government specifically, women might hold high positions without any relevant qualifications or no qualifications at all. Ironically, these women are not willing to assist or give chance to the upcoming generation to implement what they had studied for the greater good. She emphasised that, in most cases, people in government departments are not willing to work as hard as those in the private sector, where they know that they can either perform or resign. Women who hold management position can, at times, hinder development because they do not see the need to learn from the young, enthusiastic generation.

In contrast, Palesa reported that *[w]e are from very different backgrounds, some are being influenced by culture, some religious beliefs, and they put us at a corner in our life, so the beliefs inform your principles, sometimes one might find he or she needs to compromise those principles ... they [women] compromise their principles. Our problem as blacks is that we kind of hide our partners, I don't know if we are up to no good, so that makes them not feel they are part of our lives.*

One participant proposed a reason as to the small number of black women in doctoral studies, namely the age restriction for being awarded bursaries. This leads to intersectional inequalities between gender, age and race.

*There are many women out there who want to study but they don't know how, they can't access funding, due to this age restriction because they stipulate in their terms of the scholarship that they want young females, within certain ages and that I find discriminating as those who want to study but are over the mentioned age cannot apply for such scholarships.* (Palesa)

Khanya and Palesa did not perceive gender as an issue because they had never experienced the discrimination personally. Looking at other students and their situations at times, they ascribed this to racist behaviour.

It is evident from the above discussion that women's gender plays a significant part in how they experience doctoral studies. Previous research (Giddens, 1997) found that society shapes the way in which both men and women behave or do things through a process of gender socialisation. Furthermore, Tosh (1994) reported that girls graduate into womanhood by taking care of the family, under the supervision of the mother, as opposed to boys who are socialised into participating in the competitive arena in preparation of the financial caretaking of their family. According to research on women in HE (Carter et al., 2013; Lynch, 2008; Magano, 2011; Strauss, 2001), women, unlike men, assume multiple responsibilities due to gender socialisation which, in turn, has a negative impact on their doctoral studies. Moreover, the chauvinistic culture within universities adds to the disadvantage of women (Ismail, 2011). Consequently, women's views are not taken as seriously as those of their male counterparts (Moyer et al., 1999). This way of socialisation brings about gender inequality in that, as Nussbaum & Glover (1995) indicates, women are considered subordinate to men and, therefore, rarely hold any managerial positions.

However, for some participants in my study, being a black woman pursuing doctoral studies in this study meant opportunities to flourish in comparison with their oppression under apartheid laws. As Bitzer et al. (2013) report, education institutions are endeavouring to

increase the number of black women in HE to redress inequalities. It is also evident that other black women, either a mother or a lecturer, have shaped these women's experiences of doctoral studies in a positive manner. Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) argue that, having female supervisors might motivate female students to remain encouraged to complete their doctoral studies. Successful people whom one can relate to, for instance, someone of the same gender and race, show that success is within one's reach (Wolf, 2000).

## *2. How does race shape their doctoral experiences?*

Most participants stated the negative impact that race has had on their studies, more so for those who worked in the university, as work politics could not be separated from their doctoral studies.

*There are situations where you find that being black is a bit disadvantageous. There will be situations where you say, there will be things that are being done by white people, but when it comes upfront, it's as if black people did them, like it's ok for white people to do and wrong for blacks. But having a black supervisor that I'm working with has made things easy for me ... there are situations small that would make you feel you are disadvantaged as a black.* (Moleboheng)

*Well, initially it was kind of difficult, and from QwaQwa it is predominately black students, and when I came here I realised that here my white colleagues are at a higher level, how can I say it, I had to work very hard to be at their level, felt like I had to catch up, so I got a lot of pressure when I got here. When I got this side, most of the things were more advanced.* (Pinki)

*Well, at UFS colour will always be an issue, transformation doesn't take place within a day, that will remain a fact, and this is their home which they have established for themselves, so it doesn't mean the whites are that bad, it's just that they feel they need to protect what "belongs" to them.* (Palesa)

Kholu, on the other hand, stated that, due to the university's goal to reduce the gap in the number of black and white people in her department, she is more of an asset than a liability as a black woman; hence, her colleagues have no choice but to tolerate her. However, she mentioned that the new director was not including black people in the decision making in projects that were run in the department.

Judy indicated that she did not have any personal relationship with her colleagues, not even those colleagues who were also pursuing doctoral studies. She usually locked her office door and had no interaction with anyone at a personal level. There were times when her studies were not progressing too well, but she made sure to maintain a brave face so that none of her colleagues recognised that she was struggling. She felt that, due to her lack of personal relationships and being disregarded, as the only black person in the department, she could not bring herself to show any sign of weakness and chose to appear in control of her studies. She emphasised that her colleagues looked at her through the eyes of colour and automatically thought that a black person cannot contribute much to the growth of the department.

For Belinda, who is a Ghanaian citizen, when one person is wrong, whether black or white, that person is wrong. However, she discovered at the UFS that sometimes when a white person does something wrong, it is not considered wrong, but when the black person does the same thing, the black person is considered wrong and has to face the consequences. However, Belinda did not give a practical explanation or evidence to support her statement, but stated that this might be part of the aftermath of South African history.

One of the participants argued that, at the end of the day, it depends on how one views life, because there will always be those who criticise in HE, regardless of race.

Khanya reported that learning should not be about race, but about what a student is capable of achieving through the mentorship of a supervisor. She emphasised both the student and the supervisor have something to learn from each other; as a result, studying must have nothing to do with being white or black. *I have a very supportive promoter, I think with institutions it will vary. Sometimes I think as blacks we take criticism and want to make it a race issue. Yes, there are instances when other people can be racist but fortunately for me, my management department is good to me, from even while I was doing my MBA. But then certain things even within UFS, sometimes you will hear stories that you will feel that this is racism, and yet again if you think you know it all, then when a person tells you how it should be done, then you will think it is about race. It depends on how you view life.* (Khanya)

The gendered roles that are assigned to women by society put them as caretakers of the family (Giddens, 1997). Therefore, working and studying in the same department complicate life for these women even more. The institutional culture suppresses the advancement of women as they compete against men (Managa, 2013). Students from historically black universities find it challenging to perform, due to poor standards that were imposed on of the historically black universities by apartheid policies (Ocampo, 2004). However, despite the initiative to reduce the gap in numbers between black and white students after

democratisation, black students still experience gender inequality in HE. Furthermore, as indicated by Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) and Wolf (2000), supervisor–student relationships need to go beyond academic aspects in order for a student to feel comfortable in sharing non-academic factors that have a negative impact on her studies.

Regarding the two research questions mentioned above, two participants who were also full-time employees of the university indicated that it is difficult to separate work issues from their experiences as doctoral students. One specifically stated that she felt undermined as an employee: As a lecturer, she was not undermined only by colleagues, but also by the students, whom she felt did not respect her as much as they respected lecturers with PhDs. Furthermore, these participants who worked at the university while studying never felt they were part of the staff and experienced isolation oftentimes. If there were nothing work related to discuss, they would literally lock themselves in their offices so much so that they did not even ask for assistance with research projects in times of struggle. The lack of personal relationships made them want to appear in control and to hide any sign of weakness. This unhealthy situation robs the student of the significant input that other people could give to one's studies and the consequent building of self-confidence about one's own work. Sloan, Newhouse and Thompson (2013: 347) explain this isolation by what they refer to as “the principle of homophily,” which they define as “the tendency of people to form relationships with people who are similar to themselves.” This contributes to the isolation that the black women experienced in work settings where they were part of a minority.

### *3. What capabilities enable them to strive for and reach what they value?*

The crux of the CA is what people are able to do and to be to live the life they have reason to value, thus, what they consider as well-being (Sen, 1999). In HE, it is crucial that institutions provide equal opportunities for all students. In addition, it is of the utmost importance that the various needs of different students are identified and attended to in specific ways in order for these students to actualise their functionings – in this instance, the attainment of doctoral degrees. As a capability itself, the freedom to participate in HE leads to the development and expansion of other capabilities (Sen, 1999). Higher education, however, can go beyond individual achievement to render a wider contribution to society (Calhoun, 2006). In this regard, collective importance refers to the fact that, once individuals are educated, they can have a positive impact on their families, societies, countries and the world as a whole, because they are now able to expand their capabilities. The development of students' participation in HE as active citizens in a democratic society is stressed also in the White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (DHET, 2013). Furthermore, education has to



equip marginalised groups of people, or individuals themselves, to fight against oppressive gender roles (Nussbaum, 2003).

Higher education has equipped the participants in my study with capabilities in the area of research, such as academic support, independence as a researcher, freedom to create academic identity, exposure and accessibility to other academics, practical reasoning, critical thinking, concern for respect, dignity and recognition, assertiveness, resilience, and agency. Each of these capabilities will be discussed next.

### 3.1. Academic support

Most participants attribute their academic progress, or completion of their doctoral studies, to supervisors who showed support beyond academic aspects, as well as the conducive department and learning environment in the university. As students, they have or had a personal relationship with their supervisors in which the supervisors cared about their personal life. Bitzer (2007), Magano (2011), Wolf (2000) and Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) confirm the importance of good supervision and highlighted that it is essential that supervisors are not restricted to being mentors in the academic work, but also care about students as human beings. Belinda attested to this by saying she was friends with her supervisor-, and that, on its own, encouraged her when she felt she wanted to quit; the supervisor made an effort to come see her at her residence. The participants indicated that doctoral studies were different than undergraduate studies, because in the former one has a voice concerning what one wanted to research, unlike the latter where one gets instructions. The supervisors allowed them to explore what was of interest to them as students and to contribute to projects of their choice. This, in turn, encouraged them to persevere because they could research topics which they enjoyed and were passionate about. Below are some of the responses on the relationships with their supervisors:

*I have a good relationship with him, he is supportive. The people that are helping me with analysis and things like that, I managed to build good relations with them; there are ups and downs but I am enjoying what I am doing. (Khanya)*

*My supervisor is very supportive and he had been the director and it was lovely working with him, and he tried his best that racially we are equal at the centre and also regarding gender. (Kholu)*

*The relationship between me and my supervisor is an ok relationship, we get along well, and he gives me a chance to come up with my ideas, he just guides here and there. (Pinki)*

Three participants indicated that being in a study group (academic support) helped them develop academically because they became used to being critiqued. They realised that criticism is not personal, but input to improve one's work. The four participants who did not engage in any peer group discussions also attested to the importance of critical debate, which they experienced in conferences besides having critical discussions with their supervisors. Doctoral studies, therefore, prepared them for being open to learn from others. Moleboheng, for example, stated that whenever she was critiqued, she took it as a chance to learn and improve her study.

### 3.2. Independence as a researcher

Leonard et al. (2005) found that one of the reasons why students embark on doctoral studies is to be a researcher. In some instances, they have already been working as research assistants and decided to pursue doctoral studies because they enjoy their work. The capability of independence in this context refers to the fact that most of the women felt their PhDs provided them with the ability to be independent researchers.

*I have more understanding and I can be more dependent on myself, because now it's more about what I want to do ... this time I identify what I want to do. My supervisor gave me the freedom of saying, choose a project for yourself, tell me what you want to do, give me the advantages and disadvantages, and tell me how you think we can turn the disadvantages into advantages. So that's where I started being on my own and saying, ok, I think this is how I should do it, this is how I should tackle this thing and by doing this, I am trying to achieve that, and by doing so, taught me to be upfront and be dependent on myself, and trust in myself as well. (Moleboheng)*

*I didn't come here to have someone babysit me, so I also have to do my part and he as well does his part as a supervisor. (Palesa)*

### 3.3. Freedom to create an academic identity

The majority of the participants indicated that their PhD experiences helped them grow confident about their work and about what they are able to do. In addition, the participants' exposure to presenting at conferences both locally and internationally helped build their freedom to create an academic identity. This exposure creates a sense of belonging to the academic world and contributes to their becoming independent researchers. Ramsay (2000) and Chesterman (2001) cited in Brown and Watson (2010: 398) argue that "an important part of academic life is attending conferences as it offers opportunity both to present their

work and to network with experts” in the students’ fields. Belinda concurred by mentioning the humbling experience of meeting and interacting with the scholars she has read about. This made her feel confident and confirmed that she chose the correct career path as the experts listened and contributed positively to her work.

In contrast, Palesa indicated that she has never attended a conference since she started pursuing her PhD. Unlike some women in other research studies, she did not blame this on domestic demands, as research shows (Thanacoody, Bartram, Barker & Jacobs, 2006; White, 2003); rather she states that competition for resources, as well as favouritism resulting from students’ allegedly sleeping with their supervisors, were the reasons for this. Presenting their work and networking with experts improve students’ future career prospects and further contributes to shaping an academic identity. As a result of South African history (apartheid era), black women have struggled to establish a sound academic identity which, in turn, adds to their limited presence in doctoral studies regardless of measures to redress the bitter consequences of apartheid.

*It has boosted my confidence, I feel important, and as people see your worth, even though at times it is difficult, you immediately remember that there are people looking out to me and I can't give up now, so it is really boosted me a lot. Physics is one of the departments that says, really we need women in this faculty, it's rare where you can find women in this department like this one, so they really give us a chance and space to like, prove ourselves that we are worthy of what we doing. This is not only a man's world, women can also contribute in it. Some of my relatives, they were like ok, the things that you want are impossible; to start with, you don't have money, and who is going to pay for you? You surely not expect us to pay for you. So I was more like I want to show these people that I can and I will, so it's bitter for them to see me where I am, but its joyful to me 'cause here I am, I don't feel threatened or shy to boast about it, and I do boast about it, whenever I am around, they will know that I am a doctor in the making. (Moleboheng)*

*I read and read, at some point, I said to my supervisor, now I think I understand my study, because as I understood concepts within the higher education context, transformation within higher education context, transformation in terms of gender and the journey universities have taken so far, and also the recommendation, policies of higher education and the ministry or council for higher education, as I conceptualised issues, and understanding issues of transformation within South African context, then I grew and my study evolved, from one weak point to what I felt was the strongest point. When I first started working here they were superior, now they are colleagues because I can talk and discuss issues. (Judy)*

#### 3.4. Exposure to and accessibility of other academics

A study by Bazeley et al. (1996) indicated that students who wanted a career as academic researchers in Australia stated that being exposed to interacting with old scholars at conferences motivated them to complete their doctoral studies. Furthermore, Ramsay (2000) and Chesterman (2001) cited in Brown and Watson (2010) highlight the importance of upcoming researchers' presenting their work at conferences because this grants them an opportunity to network with experts in the fields they have chosen.

In this study, most participants confirmed the importance of being granted an opportunity to present at conferences, both locally and internationally, and how this has motivated them and built their self-confidence.

*The way I engaged with the authors, I remember I wrote to two of them, the authors that I used, because somehow I felt upset. Sometimes I wrote to Mamphela and asked her questions, and I felt she was wrong and for some reason her being a professor, or doctor, for one reason or the other, that didn't bother me anymore, I didn't feel inadequate. I wish I could be with her and talk things out. (Judy)*

*You are forced to be confident in what you do, you develop, but it is also humbling at the same time, because you will meet people that you read about, and these are very simple people and you could actually talk to them and they believe you are making sense. It builds your confidence. (Belinda)*

*I presented it in 2010 in Las Vegas, so that also kind of made me want to go on with PhD, because I got exposed to different nationalities who had PhDs and also who were in the process. You learn how to argue, and write critically; which is what this level requires, so your reading and writing skills definitely improve. (Khanya)*

*At this level they expect you to present and write papers, and those are subject to corrections. I believe I can write alone and finish and that did not happen before I got to this level. I never liked presenting, I am a very shy person, I can appear calm but believe me inside be a wreck, but having to come here it has given me that opportunity of saying I can learn to do this, having the presentations didn't give me a choice, but put me on a spot. (Moleboheng)*

*It has improved my communication skills, because I went to a lot of conferences and that has boosted my confidence and presentation skills. (Pinki)*

### 3.5. Opportunities to develop research skills

Among the skills that they acquired through their PhDs, the participants mentioned research skills, reading and writing, and computer skills. All the participants attested to their improved academic writing and reading skills. They also pointed out that they learned how to argue academically and, as a result, their presentation skills improved. Since most participants held a scholarship, they had to manage their finances and their time. They stated that pursuing doctoral studies has improved their general research skills (Leonard et al., 2005). These skills can contribute to being a good researcher and can, consequently, increase their employability and enhance their performance as self-employed researchers.

Specifically on improved research skills, Kholu emphasised: *I have a research skill, that's why I say I can stand on my own, computer skills and writing skills. What other skills, I think if you have research skills you have a rare skill.*

Belinda also attested to the fact that doctoral studies have improved her research skills as she has published during this journey. She proudly reported: *When I came first year, I presented something for my master's thesis. The conference was in Nigeria on food security and its impact on rural development and how irrigation plays a role, then secondly, the other presentation was in Germany, March 2013, 2012 was a conference in UFS, presented paper on the dietary choices of women in anaemia community, 2013, presented two papers in the UK, one was on ... practices in anaemic ... second, women in communities where anaemia is prevalent, they were both published, September 2013, presented in Spain, for doctoral thesis, iron deficiency amongst children in Ghana, second did with a colleague in Ghana, looking at how we can use integrated approach on ... so far that's what I have. June this year will be presenting in Ethiopia. So far I am trying to publish what I have written.*

### 3.6. Financial and time management

Pursuing doctoral studies does not only sharpen one's academic skills. Similar to the findings of Leonard et al. (2005), my study indicated that financial and time management skills also improve during doctoral studies. The participants explained that doctoral studies require discipline, because most times the supervisor gives the student a chance to grow through doing the work and meeting submission deadlines.

All participants emphasised that they became more organised and were pressured to manage their time, finances and to meet deadlines.

*It has improved my time management. (Khanya)*

*I have learned [time management] through this journey ... if things arise that I must attend, I do make time. I can work to a certain level so that when that time comes I manage to go home. (Pinki)*

*It's more of a self-management. I always joke after completion, they also need to give me a diploma in financial management. (Belinda)*

### 3.7. Practical reasoning

Nussbaum (2000: 79) views practical reasoning as “being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life.” Most participants demonstrated the development of practical reasoning. For example, it was through this journey that Khanya critically reflected on her life and weighed the pros and cons of having a husband. She concluded it was best to divorce in order for her to be able to plan her and her children’s life without any distractions. As already mentioned in the findings, Khanya indicated that her life has actually improved after the divorce.

The capabilities that emerged while talking to the participants overlapped to some extent with studies that identify capabilities related to women in education. All participants stated that, since having undertaken doctoral studies, they have grown to be able to be critical and analytical (practical reasoning), not only with regard to their studies, but throughout their lives. Judy attributed this important aspect of thinking to HE, because she did not think she would be *interrogative and in a questioning mood* and be able to hold discussions with other professionals in her department had she not pursued doctoral studies. Walker (2006) found similar capabilities in a study, though her focus was on school students, not doctoral students.

### 3.8. Critical thinking

All participants, through reciting their experiences, showed developed skills in critical thinking and analysis. Similarly, Magano (2013) and Leonard et al. (2005) found that students’ critical thinking developed as a result of pursuing doctoral studies.

*I have that, there I critique the literature myself, to say, this is what I believe is the case. Sometimes I would talk to my colleagues who have already completed the PhDs, to say what this insight is again. She said I don't want you deal with the insights within the author's arguments, with the arguments, that Jansen says this while Steward says this. I think that is the argument between authors, that's what she said. At the end of your literature study, what are you insights, what are you taking from this, and I said I think what I take is that this one author says this while the other says this and I agree with this one, and she said, on what*

*grounds? You know, in my own space, I argued and engaged in a debate with the authors and said I don't agree with Jansen here, for example, as I spoke to Crain Soudien in his absence through his writing, talked with Pillay through her studies. As I spoke to those people, sometimes I would be so upset and really question what they are saying and really question them. That made me grow to an extent, I didn't even think I would be where I am today, that interrogation, that questioning mood I think is that what I have here now. (Judy)*

*You learn how to argue, and write critically. (Khanya)*

*One of the biggest skills is being very analytical, sometimes it comes without an effort. When I was coming home I was sitting next to a guy whom we started talking and was a pilot, he asked if I knew how I ask critical questions or make critical comments? This was not the first person to say that, it comes without thinking. Another thing I never thought I had that much was passion for research. As I told you, my research is very evolutionary, I have one of my promoters who said I could make a good lecturer but a better researcher. I have grown to love research, basically that. (Belinda)*

### 3.9. Assertiveness

According to Magano (2011), education is meant to increase students' knowledge and make them feel confident and bold to raise their concerns and perceptions without being aggressive. She argues that black females should learn to be positive and not undermine themselves. In my study, assertiveness was one of the skills that was mentioned explicitly by the participants as a result of undertaking doctoral studies.

*Assertiveness, for one, is the skill that I developed. In real life, yesterday in this faculty we had a faculty dialogue where we were discussing issues on critical ways of reasoning and I think I surprised myself, I was talking more than anyone else, maybe because they were discussing matters close to my heart and for some reason I didn't feel like I would do before the PhD, I would feel these are professionals, professors, these are men because most of them are men, white people, where do I start. I didn't even think of that, for me they were colleagues, but when I first started working here they were superior, now they are colleagues because I can talk and discuss issues, the way I engaged with the authors. I feel like PhD helps you to negotiate your identity between being black and women and being an academic, because sometimes we come with our own biographies which are characterised by ideologies of weaknesses and say I know I am black and weaker and they are stronger, I am black, I can't make it and they can, you know you come up with a pre-written biography which you impose on yourself and other people around you impose on you and as you work*

*through, it is a growth process, you grow as you go along and you end up re-writing the biography where you say I know I can. (Judy)*

*We need more women in science, I am not saying other departments don't need women, but I am merely saying that this is one of the departments people keep on saying it's not for women, and if you are woman in this department you won't be able to make it, even if you are here you won't make it, you will only be here for a short while. I was more about showing them that it's more about you, it depends on you, do you want to be recognised at the end of the day, do you want to be seen that whatever you are doing is worth doing and showing that it's not about men. I mean everything is not guaranteed but you can at least try and say, ok, I tried but then failed, but in my book there is no failure. So it has taught me to stand up and do it and then say this work that I am doing, nobody else knows it more than I do, you gonna stand in front of them, tell them what you did and don't take what they say personally, take it as a learning curve, saying that, ok, he said this so that means I have to do that. (Moleboheng)*

### 3.10. Resilience

Magano (2011; 2013) mentions that postgraduate studies require great resilience due to various challenges that arise during the process. Strauss (2001) adds that, in most cases, postgraduate students have responsibilities because they often have families to take care of. The majority of my participants faced challenges while pursuing doctoral studies, but most of them underscored the importance of perseverance. Another capability that emerged as a result of HE experience is resilience. According to the Lewis, Fielder and Pangallo (2011), resilience is adapting positively to challenges such as stress, trauma, and tragedy, either resulting from family and relationship problems, illness, and financial constraints as well pressure from work. It means finding one's feet after encountering problems.

The findings of this study indicate similar results pertaining to resilience. All women showed great resilience, for instance, Kholu who, despite experiencing health problems and extending the duration of her study, never gave up. Also, Judy, irrespective of her workplace dynamics, managed to complete at the record time.

*I had this drive within me that I had to prove them wrong, I had to complete, so I stretched myself to a limit when I was thinking I was going crazy. I said, Judy, you are going to make it, I am not barging out of this, I will stretch myself and I immersed myself into the study. I don't know where I got the resilience, but I was resilient enough to know what I want, and not being able to give up, you know when you are resilient, you don't just give up. I think that was my support or that is where I drew my strength, because I remember I had three other*



*friends that were doing doctorate and now and then we would talk about our frustrations and our progress and we would discuss how it is going, but two of them dropped out of the programme, two of the dropped out and the other one was so close to me and when I looked at her every time I thought she was the strongest of the four of us, when she gave up, because of the challenge of race and gender in this university, I was crushed and I thought I wouldn't to continue as well. But somehow I got that resilience. (Judy)*

*I was approached by a very good supervisor [Prof's name], he is well known and he has a good background and I thought I needed someone who could mentor me further with this thing and I felt he was a good candidate for that and lucky he approached me to come this side and I agreed. I wanted to see what could happen out of the project I was doing before, ya, so I wanted to take it more further. But then I had that moment where I said, this cannot be over, this is not what God planned for me, it cannot be over, this is not it, that on its own, finding that I was HIV+ gave me that motivation that I can do this, irrespective of everything, this is how it's supposed to be, and just finding out that you have this, does not mean anything, so you need to go further, the dreams that you had you can still achieve, so that pushed me to be here. (Moleboheng)*

*I have the strength to endure challenging times. I just tell myself that I am almost there and one thing, nothing good ever came [finding employment], so at least I used these years to attain something. (Palesa)*

*With me, I didn't make it the first time I presented before the committee, I had to see them one on one to hear their views, so that I get to understand fully what they expect of me and then went before the panel again, that's when I passed. So it's something that is within you, whether you going to fight or surrender. I don't have the money but that isn't an obstacle, it's just about setting the right goals and working towards achieving them, even though I got divorced in the process, I will attain it eventually, even though there are negative things that came into my life during this journey, I will get my PhD. I could be sitting at home moaning about my divorce which could have come or not come despite of venturing into PhD. I regard it as a negative and I don't dwell on negative, I focus on the positive, I regard this journey as positive. (Khanya)*

### 3.11. Agency

Agency is defined as what people individually or collectively do to achieve their goals (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). Two people with the same opportunities and freedoms are likely to end up with different types and levels of achieved functionings, due to the different choices they make following their different ideas of the good life. One of the participants, as

a teenager, started looking for information on the funding available for furthering her studies after matric. Although most participants mentioned agency as a personal conversion factor, HE has also developed or improved on their being agents in their own lives. As Nussbaum (2010) states, the non-instrumental economic role of education made participants choose different lives from that of their parents because it opened their minds to the different backgrounds that people come from. Education, therefore, enabled the participants to realise alternative ways of doing and being which, in turn, developed agency to pursue the lives they have reason to value (Wood & Deprez, 2012). For example, most participants come from disadvantaged backgrounds where they were the first generation to attend an HE institution; regardless, they aspired to be highly educated. This was also seen in some women's strive to obtain financial aid since their families could not support them financially. In addition, the women in the Physics department who had to rely on men to assist them in operating machines never gave up, but found alternative ways of achieving their valued functionings.

The majority of participants showed a sense of agency in their doctoral studies. They seemed to be driven to achieve their goals due to the aspirations they had prior to pursuing their PhD. Even though some of them were already in the labour market and had other essential engagements such as being mothers, they felt the need to continue their studies. According to Magano (2011), students need to be self-driven, among other qualities, in order to make it in postgraduate studies – which these women clearly showed.

Moleboheng, who is the last born of five children raised by a single mother, displayed a great sense of agency. At a very young age, when she realised her mother would not be able to afford to pay university fees with her pension grant, she inquired about other means of funding. She applied for a loan, which paid her first degree tuition fees. Regardless of how impossible it seemed for Moleboheng to study, considering that her mother had other children to take care of, Moleboheng was convinced that she was able to change her situation by furthering her studies, after all, *it's is not about how much money you have or you do not have, it's about what you want, it's about how determined you are.*

Khanya emphasised that having a dream or vision about one's life causes one to act on achieving that dream. She reported: *I think it's the way you set your goals, it's understanding what you have to do, understanding that you have to let go certain things in order to attain this. If you want to get to a point of finishing, you need to have time for your school work, that you let go of your friends, have supportive friends because others don't understand. I let go my job at the government in order to have to study.*

Belinda reported that one must always focus and act on what one wants personally. One should not be discouraged at how other people see one. *I am self-motivated, I think that people will always judge you at the end of the day when you are not hurting anybody and is going to help you and develop you, then do it. It's all about self-motivation and you need that a lot because those people that you need encouragement from might not even be there, so you need to be motivated yourself, besides, you do it for yourself not anyone else.*

### 3.12 Respect, dignity and recognition

According to scholars such as Leonard et al. (2005), Carter et al. (2013) and (Magano, 2011), one motivation for students to complete their doctoral studies is the respect, dignity and recognition among their communities and in their academic world that accompany the title. Most participants mentioned that, as much as pursuing doctoral studies is intrinsic, it will also make them be highly respected and grant them the opportunity to hold prestigious positions. Moleboheng indicated that she wanted to bring light to her small town, that one's background does not determine where one can be. Judy, on the other hand, stated that she was the only black woman in her department and felt that the students and her colleagues did not respect her because she did not have a "Dr" on her door. Belinda also proudly mentioned that, even after she had completed her doctoral studies, she wanted to continue to being a postdoctoral fellow, because her goal in life was to be a professor before the age of 40. She further said that she has seen women earn respect through studying.

### Comparison of capability lists

Below are the sets of capabilities list as proposed by Robeyns (2003) and Walker (2006), as well as the one that I propose. Robeyns' list is of gender capabilities and is specifically aimed at conceptualising gender inequality in Western societies. Walker's list, on the other hand, is compiled from South African schooling, in which she interviewed 40 black and white girls between the ages of 15 to 16. I am aware that Robeyns' list was drawn from the Western context, which could be totally different from the context in which my list was derived from. In addition, I am aware that Walker developed an educational capability list from findings from school girl participants, while mine was drawn from women in HE. Regardless of the differences, I found both lists relevant to my study seeing that my study explores black women's experiences undertaking doctoral studies.

**Table 4: Capabilities lists**

Robeyns (gender capabilities)	Walker (education capabilities)	Ts'ephe (proposed doctoral capabilities)
Life and physical health	Practical reason	Academic support
Mental well-being	Education resilience	Independent researcher
Bodily integrity	Knowledge and imagination	Freedom to create academic identity
Social relations	Learning disposition	Exposure to and accessibility of other academics
Political environment	Social relations and social networks	Opportunities to develop research skills
Education and knowledge	Respect, dignity and recognition	Financial and time management
Domestic work and non-market care	Emotional integrity, emotions	Practical reasoning
Paid work and other projects	Bodily integrity	Critical reasoning
Shelter and environment		Assertiveness
Mobility		Resilience
Leisure activities		Agency
Time autonomy		Respect, dignity and recognition
Respect		
Religion		

As mentioned before, the capabilities that emerged during the interviews with the participants were similar, to some extent, to other studies that identify capabilities related to women in education. All participants stated that they have grown to be able to be critical and analytical (practical reasoning), not only with regard to their studies, but throughout their lives, and this is a skill they acquired since undertaking doctoral studies: *I didn't even think I would be where I am today, that interrogation, that questioning mood I think is that what I*

*have here now. In real life, yesterday in this faculty we had a faculty dialogue where we were discussing issues on critical ways of reasoning and I think I surprised myself as one participant mentioned.*

Academic support as a capability was derived from the findings. Participants mentioned the importance of having academic support from colleagues and peers in the institutions, as well as supportive supervisors who not only support them academically, but also personally. Most participants mentioned that their supervisors let them choose what they wanted to study and gave them a chance to be independent researchers. All participants indicated that embarking on doctoral studies granted them opportunities to develop research skills, which are essential qualities to have as independent researchers. Most participants further explained how essential it was for them as students to have the freedom to create an academic identity as upcoming scholars. This was made possible by presenting their work at conferences, which created in them a sense of belonging to the academic world. Most participants mentioned that having opportunities to present both locally and internationally granted them the exposure to see how other people do research and the chance to showcase their work. This, in turn, gave them access to networking with experts in their fields. This capability is similar to Walker's capability of social relations and social networks, which states that learners need to be able to form good networks.

Four participants mentioned that they were studying on a scholarship. Consequently, their financial and time management skills improved tremendously. However, most of the participants indicated that, as each person is different from the other, HE institutions should treat them as such, make an assessment of individual cases and not generalise, particularly when it comes to funding. For example, the two participants who do not have children – one is from a disadvantaged background – was the sole breadwinner in her extended family, while the other one came from a wealthy background where she did not need to support any family members (siblings and parents). It is clear that they do not need the same financial assistance. The same goes for students who are parents and those who do not have children, or even those who have partners who have the financial muscle to support the family. The participants pointed out that thorough assessment of cases should be done in order to determine what kind of assistance each student needs. For example, those participants with children and without jobs suggested that HE institutions at least find or create employment for students at doctoral level so that they earn money to support their families, because a lack thereof have a negative impact on their studies. This point agrees with a study in the USA by Lynch (2008) who found that financial support for women with children needs to be different from those without children. This point, however, does not feature in other scholars' capability lists.

The majority of participants indicated that HE has equipped them with assertiveness. They have learned not to be emotional, but to let reason speak, to become citizens who can contribute positively to the development of their countries and beyond. They also indicated that doctoral education requires students to be resilient. Resilience is a capability that appears in Walker's list. This capability develops as a result of having aspirations and determination to achieve one's dreams. Participants in this study also displayed great agency to achieve their goals despite the challenges they encountered on their journey.

All participants showed their concern for respect, dignity and recognition. For example, Judy mentioned explicitly that the reason she embarked on the doctoral journey was because she felt she was being disrespected by both her colleagues and her students because she did not have "Dr" before her name. This is a capability similar to the one in Walker's (2006: 128-129) ideal-theoretical list for HE capabilities, which states that one should not be "devalued because of one's gender, race, and social class." Judy emphasised the fact that pursuing doctoral studies for her was mostly because of how she wanted people to address her; it was about her pride. This resonates with Leonard et al.'s (2005) point that one reason why people acquire a PhD is for the sake of the title. The participants in the Physics department indicated that they needed to be respected, treated with dignity and recognised as people who have something to offer and can contribute positively to the development of their countries and beyond. One of them specifically mentioned that, besides acquiring the necessary skills to make her community a better place, just having the title of a doctor was one of the reasons she embarked on the doctoral journey. Also, as a black woman qualifying for a managerial position, Khanya indicated that the shortage in human resources was one of the reasons why she pursued doctoral studies. Lastly, at her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party, Kholu was inspired by a female professional to embark on doctoral studies and hold a prominent position. All these examples are an indication that these women needed to be respected, treated with dignity and recognised as people who have something to offer. Walker (2006) found similar capabilities, and Robeyns (2003) identified respect, similar to my study.

Having discussed the capability list that I compiled from the emerging capabilities in my study, I move on to the conversion factors that could influence the participants' ability to convert these capabilities into valued functionings. Conversion factors can either be personal (e.g. intelligence, health), social (societal norms, values and principles) or environmental (physical environment in which a person lives). It is important to state that, as much as conversion factors are negative, they can also be positive, in which case they expand the agentic ability to convert capabilities into valued functionings.

### 3. What challenges and obstacles do they face in pursuing PhD? (positive and negative conversion factors)

The women indicated several challenges that they faced while pursuing their doctoral studies, which ranged from a lack of funding to being away from their children. Crocker and Robeyns (2010) describe conversion factors as those factors that hinder or facilitate the conversion of opportunities into achieving or not achieving the desired goal. These conversion factors are divided into three categories: personal, social and environmental. The personal conversion factors are internal to the person, such as intelligence, reading skills and health. The social conversion factors are factors from the society in which a person lives, for example, the societal norms, values, principles and hierarchies. The environmental conversion factors are the factors that emerge from the place where one lives. Most of the participants indicated that gender and/or race were some of the hindrances that had a negative impact on their doctoral studies. I will discuss the conversion factors and their impact on agency according to the three categories.

#### Personal

A personal conversion factor that was mentioned by one participant was that she enrolled for a PhD solely because she needed a job. As a research assistant, she could not afford to forfeit the job due to the fact that she was not ready to undertake doctoral study. This, however, could have caused the student to quit, because she was struggling to complete her studies, but her relationship with her supervisor was one of the reasons that kept her going. According to Crocker and Robeyns (2010: 64), “as agents, persons individually and collectively decide to achieve their goals – whether altruistic or not, in the world, as agents they have more or less power to exercise their agency.”

On the contrary, Moleboheng reached doctoral level despite coming from a single-parent home, being the last born of five children who did not obtain any tertiary education. Regardless of her poor background, she became an agent by finding herself a loan to pay for her first degree. Similar to this study, Magano (2009) established that black women in postgraduate studies were able to progress despite the challenges they encountered due to the above-mentioned conversion factors.

#### Social

According to Carter et al. (2013: 341), “the desire to enact an identity of a ‘good woman’ governs women’s decisions about the appropriate allocation of time and effort, which in turn impacts upon stress.” The three women who had children stated that it was difficult to be a

mother and studying at the same time because one had to neglect the needs of the children and miss important events in their lives. Judy, for example, said that if there were one thing she regretted about venturing into this journey, it was not being there for her children, especially her teenage daughter, who struggled to come to terms with her mother's work and studies. Judy was not sure whether the damage caused could be restored. In this regard, Pillay (2009: 502) indicates that measures should be taken to ensure that women succeed in both their academic life and their roles as mothers. According to Pillay, academic mothers "constitute a unique duality." First, they engage in intellectual work, which was seen as a man's job because it involves logical thinking and is unemotional. Secondly, they are mothers, which traditionally entails being nurturing and staying at home with the family. Pillay then suggests that academic mothers should have the freedom to live to their full potential, that of being mothers and also pursuing their careers.

The mothers in the study felt that they have neglected their children and often felt guilty for not being there to raise their children. Irrespective of whether they stay with the children, doctoral studies consumes so much of their time that they end up being strangers to them as well as their whole family.

The majority of women worldwide have been disadvantaged and marginalised, particularly due to patriarchy. Nussbaum & Glover (1995) articulates that women, in rare cases, have been put into positions of power such as being kings or priests; yet, they have seldom been acknowledged for being wealthy without male assistance, as they have always been subordinate to men, be it within families or in the workplace. It was, thus, not surprising that all participants in the current study reported that gender socialisation has influenced or negatively affected their performance in education. In this regard, scholars such as Magano (2011; 2013) and Pillay (2009) state that female students deregister due to challenges they face that make it difficult, if not impossible, to complete. Even the participants who were not married and had no children still emphasised the need to finish their studies before "life gets complicated. Strauss (2001) attributes this attrition to the fact that many postgraduates have multiple responsibilities alongside studying, which put a strain on their academic progress. Johnson-Bailey (2004: 345) asserts that "family responsibilities which include childcare issues, finances, role strain and lack of emotional support" could discourage the students.

All the factors that contribute to the attrition rates of postgraduates mentioned here apply to the experiences of the women in the current study. Similarly, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004), Magano (2011; 2013) and Maher et al. (2004) conducted research on women's progress in postgraduate level and found the factors that constrain or facilitate their progress to be a lack of funding, not being able to master family responsibility and studying, difficult supervisors,



poor management or organisation of students, and being discouraged when topics had to be refined over and over.

Maher et al. (2004) argue that marital and family problems during the pursuit of doctoral degrees cause additional stress seeing that emotional support from family members is often critical to doctoral students. Yet, one of the participants went through divorce while pursuing her PhD after she had to weigh her priorities, either the PhD or the husband. She deemed it wise to divorce because she believed the divorce to be inevitable, regardless of her studying. She declared it was after the divorce that life became better, as she could make appropriate decisions concerning her life and that of her two daughters compared to when she was married. This divorce, she said, was a solution to the pressure she encountered in her marriage.

All participants stated that the doctoral journey alienated them from family and friends as they had no time to attend to important social gatherings. They explained that one has to be committed to one's work in order to progress. Acker and Armenti (2004) attest to this by stating that women in academia have to have sleepless nights in order to attain their goals. The loneliness brought on by this doctoral journey and achievement of the goal (completing the degree) made one participant feel worthless, that she did not have much to live for, as she attained the degree, but lost many people close to her. Previous studies (Brown & Watson, 2010; Leonard et al., 2005; Managa, 2013; Wolf, 2000) have shown that doctoral students undergo intense loneliness during their doctoral journey. This was confirmed in this study as most participants declared that this journey consumed all their time.

*I said PhD for me was the loneliest, the most challenging, the most stressful, you know ... people would think that I am lying, I didn't have any support structure. My social life just crashed because I still don't have a social life, I don't have a friend right now, not even one. When I stand up here at half past four I going back home, I was saying to my kids, to the older one, recently, I think it was last week, that I sometimes I feel like I am tired of life, because for me, it's like a routine, I woke up in the morning, bath and go to work, sit at work and do what I have to do, come back home eat and sleep, do the same thing again the next day. So I don't have friends that I can call and ask them out to coffee, I don't know. I was talking to my sister's daughter just a few minutes before you came here and she was telling me I have my aunty and my family from my mother's side and I think she had visited there last week, they were telling her I had changed. Practically I don't have a family, in terms of how they view me now, as this educated somebody who doesn't care about them anymore, who doesn't see them as worthy people in my life anymore. Maybe I am like that, maybe somehow something changes that you don't recognise yourself as an individual. I remember*

*my sister, blood sister that I regard as my mother, one time I visited her in Welkom, she is now staying permanently, I tell you I found her outside and she couldn't give me a bench, she insisted we get inside the house because "people of my calibre" don't sit outside in the sun, I am talking about my own sister. I must admit I feel isolated, from my family friends, family and everything. (Judy)*

*When you doing research you just don't have a life, no social life, you just focusing on the research and that puts strain to family and friends, you miss out on the life of you cousins, if you have any. (Pinki)*

*For me weekends and during the week is same thing, so it's a bit difficult for me to like have that time for him, considering that he doesn't stay around. We stay far from each other, so at times I need to make time, and when I make time it has to be the whole week, so when I have to make time for the whole week I feel like I am falling behind with everything, so it's a rollercoaster. (Moleboheng)*

Many scholars indicated that a lack of funding is among the major factors that hinders completion of studies. Maher et al. (2004: 387) purport that "the availability of financial resources has been frequently and repeatedly cited as a critical factor affecting degree completion." Bearing in mind that postgraduate students often have families to provide for, insufficient or no funding at all puts a strain on the students and affects their progress. Most participants, especially those with children, identified the main problem as funding. This confirms what Richards and Schmiede (1993) stated as the main problem for women who are students as well as parents. Owing to a lack of funding, the students not only worry about the present moment, but also about the coming years, which amounts to indescribable pressure. This was the major source of their anxiety and negatively affected their studies.

Furthermore, Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006: 140) indicated that "competition for financial assistance may put student cooperation and collegiality at risk, restraining relationships that might otherwise be supportive." In the same vein, Palesa, who is a student in the Physics department, spoke about the unhealthy competition for awards, money and presenting one's work at international conferences. She was the only participant who in her department has not had presented her work abroad, attributing this to other students' willingness to provide sexual favours to their supervisors. However, she did not provide evidence to back up this statement.

Despite all the social challenges that most participants encountered, they were inspired and motivated by female lecturers, family members and women who had obtained their doctorates to withstand the negative factors that could have hindered their progress. Kurtz-

Costes et al. (2006) affirm this point by stating that, according to psychological theories, people look up to others who are similar to them with regard to, for example, personality characteristics, background, race and gender. Hence, women role models would demonstrate authentic and possible professional roles for women students. For most participants, the responsibility of taking care of their families exerted pressure on them. This was the main problem for those who had to take care of their families financially without anyone to assist. Nevertheless, this on its own was one of the reasons why they became resilient and persevered, as they wanted to complete and stand a chance of securing well-paying jobs that will enable them to take care of their families. Being the head of a family and not earning was a challenge for most of the participants with children.

Most participants attributed their continuous progress to family and support from people close to them. The fact that they had parents, siblings, partners or friends who encouraged them motivated them to press on during tough times. As Judy stated, the fact that people close to her kept saying she was almost there, even though she knew she was still far from completion, made her stay and not quit. The women in this study indicated that they had supportive supervisors who assisted in their personal growth, both academically and emotionally, regardless of the supervisors' gender or race. The supervisors created room for the students' academic growth by allowing them to engage in independent thinking. This, in turn, helped the students to critically analyse their work and that of other scholars. It is important to mention that the majority of the participants' supervisors were males, who related well with their female students. This is contradictory to what other scholars have found in studies on gender and doctoral studies. For instance, Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) claim that women students prefer female supervisors compared to male supervisors.

Magana (2011) indicates that students who pursue doctoral degrees and have peer group discussions in their faculties tend to complete in greater numbers as opposed to those who walk this journey alone. In my study, participants affirmed this statement by reporting that having such gatherings helped encourage them and, more importantly, they learned to be comfortable with discussing their work with their peers and learning from one another. Participants who did not have any peer discussions in their departments indicated the need for such group discussion because they thought it would have provided support and an exchange of ideas with their peers.

All women in the study were aware that venturing into PhD would open doors to prestigious jobs in which they can help change their world and have a positive influence in their communities. Leonard et al. (2005) found that the reasons for pursuing doctoral studies include professional development and recognition, as well as intrinsic reasons, which

resonate with the findings of this study. Having a PhD places the women on the same level as men, if not higher, and earns them respect. This leads to a sense of belonging regardless of the discrimination some of them experienced while pursuing doctoral studies, particularly those who were registered in the Physics department and the Faculty of Education. Furthermore, being a black woman with this degree would help liberate these women to change the lives of upcoming black students by showing that they, too, can achieve and live the lives they have reason to value.

#### Environmental

The environmental structure, in this case, was the university, and for those participants who were employed by the UFS, the departments in which they worked will also be considered as the environmental structure. The reason is because it was challenging to separate the experiences as a student and as an employee for those who are working and studying in the same departments. The majority of the participants indicated that a lack of structure such as peer group discussions made the doctoral journeys the loneliest journey of their lives. This is because students feel they walk this journey solely with their supervisors. Regardless of the latter's support, the students felt that they could not admit when they were stuck due to fear that the supervisors would assume they were incompetent. Jairam and Kahl (2012) concur that peer group discussions provide emotional support and encouragement for students both in challenging times and in celebrating professional successes.

The participants from the Physics department claimed that their environment restricts the capabilities of black women due to its white male domination. They felt that their ideas were not taken seriously as those of their male counterparts. This, on its own, put more strain on them as they had to work extra hard in order to earn their colleagues' and supervisors' trust in their abilities. Pinki stated that one has to be courageous to voice one's ideas. Nevertheless, this was not unique to the women in the Physics department, because most participants, in one way or the other, experienced being discriminated against because of their gender and race. This "double-barrelled stereotype" affected their performance more. Palesa explained that they were discriminated against even by other black male students, by virtue of being female. This vulnerability excluded them from informal networks and the women chose as much as possible not to engage in any gatherings with their male colleagues because of demeaning comments made by these male colleagues.

Furthermore, women from the Physics department indicated that the equipment they used required manual labour, which would, at times, force them to ask for help from their male counterparts, who mistook this as a sexual favours invitation. As a result of patriarchy, institutions are organised in a way that perpetuates male dominance because the men were

the people who had authority to set rules (Stromquist, 2006). Moreover, HE institutions still reluctantly extend women's rights, which is a stark contradiction to the Women Empowerment and Gender Equity Bill (2013: 5) stipulating that HE should "eliminate prejudices and current practices that hinder the achievement and enjoyment of equality and social cohesion."

As mentioned previously, Ocampo (2004) states that apartheid legislation was put in place to create and perpetuate educational. The Bantu Education Act of 1952 ensured that black people received education that restricted their potential and kept them in the working class. Four participants attended predominantly black high schools and historically black universities before pursuing their doctoral studies at the UFS. Unsurprisingly, they felt disadvantaged when arriving at this university compared with their white colleagues who seemed to be more knowledgeable and at a higher level. These women had to work harder in order for them to feel confident in their abilities.

The women felt that being black was at times disadvantageous. For example, in some instances, a white person would do something with no consequences, but should that same act be done by a black woman, it was wrong. Nevertheless, they stated that having black supervisors, regardless of their gender, made things bearable. Only one participant said that she has never felt being discriminated against as a result of being black; yet, she has heard of instances where other students had not been treated well within the institution. She put more emphasis on black people's being too sensitive while being supervised.

Racial discrimination has been the most organising factor of universities in South Africa, as the Soudien Report (2008) states that, regardless of the initiatives put in place to overcome racism, South Africa is still not close to victory in this regard. It is essential to mention that the racial climate and persistent gendered inequalities have relevance here because they count as negative environmental conversion factors.

Having studied previously at a rural university (UFS QwaQwa campus) also proved to be a factor that hindered or delayed some of the participants. For instance, Pinki felt she was behind in comparison with her counterparts who completed their master's programme on the UFS main campus. She admitted that some of the facilities at the main campus were more advanced and that she struggled to reach the same level as her counterparts. Also, Belinda, being a Ghanaian national, experienced delays in the pay-outs of her sponsorship to the point where she struggled to survive in the foreign country, which had a negative impact on her studies in some regards.

#### 4.1 A lack of funding (negative conversion factor)

According to Magano (2011; 2013), Leonard et al. (2005) and Brown and Watson (2010), the issue of inadequate funds is the most common factor for doctoral students. Most participants indicated that a lack of funding was a particularly big challenge for them. Some were self-funded, while others had funding, although not sufficient, especially for those who had children to look after. Delays in the processing of funding also affected their studies.

*I consider funding a major challenge ... believe me the bursary that I have is not enough, a lot of money goes into accommodation, and you have to also eat, so imagine the situation where I have children. Right now, my worry is next year, my funding ends this year but I am not yet done with my studies, now I wonder how I am going to survive. So that is the challenge, because somewhere it affects my concentration in my work. Women tend to like starting families and as long as there is still lack of funding, most women will be forced to stay where they are and not pursue their studies. (Palesa)*

*I pay for myself, and it's hectic. I get texts from the university about fees as we speak! (Khanya)*

*The funding delays a lot, and most of the things I have to do, like collecting data, even the department has approved your studies, when the money takes long then you have to pre-finance and when I don't have a choice I use my living amount. I can't say it is sufficient because before they pay, I struggle. They give living expense once a year, I saved my living expenses as much as I could, and that's what I use when they delay. Sometimes it becomes too much to bear. You have to be able to have money to do research even when it is not there. One of the things I realised we don't have at UFS is the exposure to practice. I have heard other people in other universities, they have opportunities to teach, to do research and other things, sometimes this also helps them to keep going, either financially or improving their CVs. I did have that experience for one semester, I feel it should be part of the study, the curriculum, the heart of the study that at PhD a student is given work or an expose to do work. This shouldn't be free, students should be paid to do that, seriously, at this age when you are a full-time student you are not working elsewhere while you still have responsibilities, research experience, teaching and projects. (Belinda)*

One participant made it clear that if a job opportunity were to present itself, she would definitely take it, even if it meant dropping out of her studies.

*If anything good comes regarding a job, I will apply and leave, one cannot stay where one sees clearly that poverty becomes part of one's life ... if I get a job opportunity honestly I think I will leave, I am going to be tempted. (Palesa)*

Of all the participants, only one stated that she was not ready in any way to pursue doctoral studies when she registered. She enrolled in a doctoral programme solely because this was the only way she could keep working at the university as a research assistant; and being the main breadwinner of her family, she had no alternative but to take the offer. It is not surprising that she had already pursued it for almost eight years without success: *I had told my supervisor even before I started that I was not ready, but then if that's the only way I can be here and getting something regular, as in payment, then yes, I will do it. (Kholu)*

#### 4.2 A lack of peer group discussions (negative conversion factor)

Scholars such as Maher et al. (2004) and Johnson-Bailey (2004) established that peer group discussions help students progress with their studies as they create an environment where they can share ideas and receive constructive critiques from their peers. However, in this study, most participants mentioned a lack of peer discussion groups and peer support within their departments as another big challenge.

*It was just me and my study, you know, when the supervisor tells you to go and read and you don't know how to read or what to read. All those kind of issues that surround finding your niche, what is it that I really want, finding your focus at the end of the day, so I had to come up with my own focus, there was nobody to interact with since most of us junior staff here are doing different topics, so I wouldn't go to my colleagues and tell them I am stuck, can you help me because you do that you already disturb that person doing their work. Then you sit here and feel you don't want to continue, you feel this yoke, one; you don't talk to people though you are swimming in the same pool because you are doing different things. More like swimming in different waters. (Judy)*

*No, we had it initially when we presented our proposals, there was a committee that would tell you how to go about doing it, but after that it is just you and your promoter. I don't have peers that I discuss with unless I go to anyone that I know, that I get advice from, maybe those who have done their PhDs. (Khanya)*

*I just can't find room to bounce my idea with someone who will give me input. I ran around campus in 2011, trying to find out if am I still continuing with my studies, who is going to help me and even though he is sick, I would go to him and he would say continue, and I would go to other ladies like, this lady who just started her PhD, started it last year, went to her, I just*

*wanted to talk to all black females to find out can't we start something, so that they can look at my stuff, but I never got that kind of concrete support. So I don't have that support. (Kholu)*

*There isn't much of that, we used to have seminars presentations, and these were for sharing one's work with the group, it's not like group discussing issues, it's about presenting, kinda like mini progression report. The reason I am saying it's supervisor–student relationship is because you don't have classes to attend, you don't have forums where you can meet as postgraduate students, but then we have seminars and colloquium for the faculty which happen once a year. I have only attended once, there have been two of those. Sometimes it is difficult because some people are doing their studies elsewhere or they are doing it on part-time basis, so in that case, they are almost never around. (Belinda)*

In the above findings, gender, race, a lack of funding, a lack of peer discussion groups and being a woman in male-dominated fields were the themes that frequently emerged.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began by painting a picture of the participants through their biographies and capturing their voices which, I believe, are essential in connecting them with the reader. This was followed by the section on the findings and the discussion thereof according to the four research questions that guided this study. The first research question was: "In what ways are black women's experiences of doctoral studies shaped by gender?" Most women indicated that being part of a community restricted them to societal and gendered expectations that shaped their experiences: They ascribed their struggle to balancing their studies and motherhood to their upbringing. However, most women, when answering this first research question, indicated awareness that there are opportunities for black women, for example, being one of very few women in the natural sciences and pursuing doctoral studies, to qualify for management positions. Most participants claimed that they experienced gender inequalities within their fields of study, as well as within their work environments.

In relation to the second research question, which inquired about how their experiences were shaped by being black, most participants who came from the historically black universities mentioned that the standard of teaching was lower as opposed to historically white universities, which they experienced when they came to the UFS. Furthermore, most participants stated that working and studying in the same institution was difficult as one could not separate office politics from being a black female PhD candidate. However, regardless of the challenges, they persevered due to a few factors, such as academic support, good supervision, agency and family support.



In relation to the capabilities that this doctoral journey offered this group of women, it is evident that more women can complete their degrees as long as the conversion factors that they encounter could be addressed and reduced. Regardless of the challenges, these women showed great agency and resilience.

The last chapter provides the final conclusions, recommendations and limitations of my study.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This chapter will first present a summary of the findings, based on the main research questions. General conclusions will be discussed, and then the limitations of the study and the recommendations that emerged from the study.

The attrition of women in HE, particularly in doctoral studies, has been a worldwide concern (Carter et al., 2013), the main reason being that the way academia is structured still puts women at a disadvantage (Wolf, 2000). Black women specifically are completing their doctoral studies at a much lower rate than white women in South Africa.

The general conclusions will be guided by the CA by Amartya Sen. According to Sen (1999), this approach takes into account the well-being of individuals. Sen argues that people are able to reflect on and reason about what they regard as of value in their lives and they are also active agents in making choices and acting towards achieving that which is of value to them. Sen further posits that, for development to occur, people need to have access to opportunities and freedoms. It was imperative for me as a researcher in my exploration of black women undertaking doctoral studies to look through the capabilities lens because few, if any studies similar to mine, have been conducted using this approach, and none have been conducted in the South African context. More importantly, the CA is unique in its focus on individuals' role in striving for what they have reason to be or do in living the lives they choose, in this case, black women pursuing doctoral studies at one South African university. The CA evaluates a university's commitment to human development, specifically in this context, creating capabilities for black women in doctoral studies by considering the conversion factors that could hinder or promote their well-being.

### **Summary of research findings**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies at a South African university, noting both the positive and negative experiences in order to understand what HE institutions need to do to attract and retain this target group until completion.

### **Research question 1: In what ways are black women's experiences of doctoral studies shaped by gender?**

The findings indicated that the majority of participants were not discriminated against as a result of gender. Three of the seven participants, who were in the Physics department, stated that the large equipment used for the sampling of their work put them at a disadvantage because they had to ask for help from their male counterparts. This made

them vulnerable to harassment because many of men wanted sexual favours in return. Two of the participants felt that in the departments in which they were working and pursuing their PhDs that their opinions were not taken seriously because they were females. These participants stated that they did not have any personal relationships with their colleagues, even those who were pursuing their doctoral studies as well. This did not necessarily relate to their doctoral studies, but rather to their experience as female employees in the institution. I find this relevant to mention, because it was almost impossible to separate their experiences as students and as employees. In general, the impact of gender on the participants' doctoral experience in this study showed that gender discrimination is still a factor within higher learning institutions. It might not be as bad as before, but women still experience being treated as inadequate and possible sexual objects for their male counterparts.

### **Research question 2: How does race shape women's doctoral experiences?**

The majority of participants stated that race influenced their experiences within doctoral studies. For instance, having obtained their previous degrees at historically black universities, they experienced coming to the UFS as challenging because they felt they were behind academically due to advanced facilities, particularly in the Physics department, which were not available at their previous universities. Also, most women in the Physics department felt that their views were not accepted because they were women and black at the same time. Only two participants indicated that they have never experienced being marginalised as a result of race, and one attributed this to how each person views life. The same participant explained that some people make everything about race when indeed the emphasis should be on academic progress. Another participant, who was an international student, explained that, though she had never been discriminated against because of race, she has witnessed instances of people colour-coding situations and getting away with certain behaviours hiding behind colour. This she saw as the aftermath of South African history.

For this group of participants, race was still a great factor that influenced their studies negatively. It was, however, indicated that, as much as it was a negative conversion factor, race also influenced one of the participants' life positively. She did not allow it to demotivate her especially because she had a great deal to learn from white people, as much as they had to learn from her.

### **Research question 3: What capabilities enable them to strive for and reach what they value?**

All participants indicated that setting one's goals and acting towards achieving them is what made them persevere and obtain their degrees. They all showed some sense of agency in striving for what they want to be or do in reaching well-being. For instance, it is through this journey that one of them made a critical reflection upon her life and chose to divorce her husband in order to obtain her doctorate. This does not imply that the more a woman is educated, the more she does not value her marriage, but shows that education liberates people from bondages of habit and custom, as Nussbaum (2010) indicated. As Walker (2007: 179) states, "the capability approach attaches great importance to agency and genuine reflective choice, that education in any context should promote agency, and as a key element of this agency that education should facilitate the development of autonomy and empowerment." Education helped this participant make decisions that she felt were in line with how she visualised her life and how she desired to live her life. In this regard, she acted upon or against any possible obstacle that could have hindered her well-being (in this case, obtaining a doctorate).

All participants indicated the need for a support system, from supervisors, colleagues, friends and family members. Maher et al. (2004) argue that doctoral students view the support from family members to be significant in completing their studies, which can be very emotional journey. All participants indicated that they had supportive supervisors.

Furthermore, pursuing doctoral studies enabled these women to be independent researchers. Even though they had supervisors to guide them, the supervisors allowed them to conduct research on what they (students) wanted to research. This gave them freedom to create academic identities, which they enhanced through international conferences, boosting their confidence and refining their presentation, research, writing and computer skills. Presenting at international conferences also exposed them to the global academic world and gave them access to other academics, which motivated them even more. Of all the seven participants, only one had not presented at conferences, which she attributed to scarce resources and opportunities, for which students had to compete and oftentimes compromised their principles and integrity, which she was not willing to do. Most participants mentioned the need for respect from other colleagues, for being treated with dignity and for being recognised as a human being who could contribute towards change in their lives and in the community at large. Most participants indicated that this journey developed their critical thinking, enhanced their confidence in their capabilities and fostered assertiveness in them.

#### **Research question 4: What challenges and obstacles do they face in pursuing PhD?**

The main challenge that hindered the participants' progress was a lack of funding, regardless of initiatives, for example, from the NRF, which are in place to increase doctoral production and enhance the quality of research training (Academy of Science South Africa, 2010). Two of the participants were employees of the university and had benefits to study for free, and two others were on a scholarship and also did not have any children or families to provide for. Thus, they felt the funding was sufficient. On the other hand, of the three that experienced a financial challenge, two were on a scholarship of which one had four children to support while the other received the funds very late in the year. However, receiving the money late worked as a positive conversion factor as the participant stated that she learned skills to manage her finances. As many scholars (Carter et al., 2013; Magano, 2011; 2013) note, funding issues demotivate doctoral students and is a critical factor behind the high attrition rate of these students. One of the participants stated that, even though she was in her third year, not far from completion, she would not hesitate to take up a job offer should the opportunity present itself, terminating her studies. Allan and Dory (2001) ascertained that students' leaving PhD programmes to take up jobs is one of the reasons for attrition. Furthermore, as Herman (2011a) states, students might drop out and seek employment due to the three-year duration of NRF funding, which is sometimes not sufficient for them to complete. A participant in my study concur by pointing out that, as a mother of four, she might be forced to seek employment next year as her funding was to end and she might not have completed her PhD by then.

The majority of women, especially those with children, felt that being a woman in itself is a disadvantage. The reason they mentioned was the societal expectations that they had to conform to in order to maintain membership of the community. For instance, those with children were still expected to look after the children and the children expected their mothers to be present in their lives; failure to do so brought consequences such as isolation from families and children.

Two participants stated that, as much as their academic relationship with the supervisors was good, they did not relate on a personal level. They felt that the supervisors did not create an environment in which the students could feel comfortable to share the personal problems they encountered during their studies. Sayed, Kruss and Badat (1998) and Deem and Brehony (2000) argue that students perform much better at this level when their supervisors show concern and care for their personal lives. More than half of the participants in this study came from communities in which women were still expected to be homemakers; though a few women have started to venture beyond these boundaries lately. Those who

were restricted by societal expectations battled to pursue the lives they have reason to value while feeling solely responsible for taking care of their families.

Another challenge was a lack of preparedness for doctoral studies. Owing to financial problems, one participant stated she embarked on the doctoral journey, seeing that it was the only way she could keep her job, and indicated strongly that she was not ready to pursue doctoral studies at the time she registered. One of the participants found competing for international conferences stressful and felt, to a certain extent, that some students were favoured. In this regard, Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006: 140) claim that “competition for financial assistance may put student cooperation and collegiality at risk, straining relationships that might otherwise be supportive.” Similarly, Carter et al. (2013) report that quite a number of female doctoral students experience problems with their partners due to decreased emotional, sexual and social availability, which could lead to divorce. One of the participants indeed indicated that she went through divorce while she was pursuing her doctorate and attributed this to not having time for family – she had to prioritise between attaining her academic goal and having a husband.

In summary, it is evident from this group of students, though I do not generalise to all black doctoral female students, that being female and black still affect students negatively. Although Universities are far from defeating gender inequality and racial discrimination, for this particular study race has been more of an issue than gender. For instance, black women who registered within the white male dominated disciplines explained that their lack of physical strength as compared to their male counterparts put them at a disadvantage that to quit was not a far option. Also, being black and from historically black universities; these women felt their education system did not prepare them to compete with the whites, hence coming to study at a previously white institution was difficult for them. Furthermore, there are other challenges such as a lack of funding, unpreparedness for doctoral studies, and motherhood, to mention a few, that remain obstacles to the progress of black women in doctoral studies. Had it not been of their agency and determination as well as support from their families and supervisors, this group of women could have surrendered and quit as those other black women which research show that they leave doctoral programmes before completion.

Prior studies on HE have identified such challenges, but none of them have applied the CA, which is what this study has done. Using the CA to explore black women's experience could bring us closer to addressing this problem of high dropout rates within HE institutions. This study could inspire scholars to conduct research on a larger population of this group of

women, using the CA, in order to get closer to attracting and retaining black women in doctoral studies.

### **Recommendations from the study**

Drawing from the findings of this research, I make suggestions as to how to improve the attraction and retention of black women undertaking doctoral studies. Below I identify the gaps which need to be addressed to enable black women to complete their doctoral studies at this South African university.

#### **Sufficient funding.**

Students should be well funded for the duration of their studies, to afford renting apartments outside the university residences as they can bring their children to stay with them. With income earned from student assistantships posts, together with their stipends students could afford the basics for their children. This could reduce the high dropout rates due to need for survival.

#### **Students should be regarded as individuals**

Students should be treated the same, despite their differences in gender and race. Higher education institutions must move to a point where each student is seen as an individual with unique strengths which could be developed into functionings that a student has reason to value. Most importantly, children should be taught and encouraged, from a very young age, to pursue that which they want, regardless of gender. This means that institutions such as families, schools and communities should teach children to be who they want to be. However, this would only be achieved if HE institutions were to train parents and communities with regard to the importance of developing each person's capabilities regardless of gender and race.

#### **Access to Internet**

Knowledge is the key to everything. Thus, governments, together with HE institutions and stakeholders, should enable families to have access to the Internet. There should be no instances where those who want to learn are restricted to do so. There must be free access to the Internet even beyond HE institution campuses.

#### **Policies in higher education institutions based on the capabilities approach**

Because the CA is a framework that evaluates the freedoms and opportunities that individuals have in order to live the lives they have reason to value, it is essential that HE institutions formulate policies that are capability based. Human development should not be

measured only in economic terms, as other egalitarian approaches propose, but holistically in that individuals determine what is of importance for their individual well-being. This can be achieved by implementing individual-focused policies which will allow treating all students as individuals with different backgrounds who require unique assistance and support in order to have their desired functionings, in this case, doctoral degrees. This does not apply to black women only, but must be a blanket that covers all students.

### **Limitations of the study**

One limitation of this study is that, since a small sample was used, selected from only one South African university, the findings cannot be generalised to apply to all black women undertaking doctoral studies in South Africa. However, the aim of the study was not to generalise, but to note both the negative and positive in-depth experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies in order to increase our understanding of their daily lived experiences and what they believe can be done to support them in obtaining their doctoral degrees. Furthermore, since this is the first study in the African context using the CA, there were no similar studies that could be used to compare with this one and there were no studies to build from.

### **Areas for future research**

This study could serve as the platform for other studies using the CA in future since the sample, as mentioned above, was too small to be generalised to all black women undertaking doctoral studies in South Africa.

There remains a need to address gender and racial issues in South African universities, for which the capabilities approach seems well suited with its holistic view of individual well-being and advocacy of opportunities for students to be who and what they have reason to value. Using the CA as the framework in closing the gap between different genders and race might result in social justice and empowerment to the previously marginalised category of black women doctoral students.



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## **Appendix 1: Participant information sheet**

Participants within this study are black women undertaking doctoral studies at one South African university. The reason for selecting this group of women is due to the fact that research shows that black women drop out from doctoral programmes prematurely, hence as a researcher I found the need to explore how they experience their academic journey. Within this category, only those in their final year of study will be asked to partake. Both women who are mothers and those without children will be interviewed. No age specification will be a criterion for participants' selection.

### **Title of Research**

The experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies at one South African University.

### **Aim of the research**

- To explore how black women experience their doctoral journeys in order to produce new knowledge and recommendations on how to attract and retain them until completion of their studies.

### **Significance of the study**

It is important to explore the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral study in order find out how institutions can improve their support so that black women do not drop out prematurely.

## Appendix 2: Consent Form

This research study is a requirement for a Master's Degree in Higher Education by full dissertation at the University of the Free State in South Africa conducted by Lifutso Ts'ephe. It seeks to explore the experiences of black women undertaking doctoral studies.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign this consent form in order to proceed with the interview.

As a participant, I fully understand the purpose of the study and voluntarily agree to participate in the study. I also understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the researcher; however, in no document will my name be revealed.

.....

Participant's Name

.....

Participant's signature

.....

.....

Researcher's name and signature

Date

### **Appendix 3: Email sent to black female PhD students at the University of the Free State**

I got your email from Directorate Institute of Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP – UFS). My name is Lifutso Ts'ephe, doing masters in Higher Education. I am doing a study on the experiences of black woman undertaking doctoral studies at a South African University (UFS).

The aim of the study is to explore how black women experience their doctoral journeys in order to produce new knowledge and recommendations on how to attract and retain them until completion. I find it important to explore their experiences in order to establish how higher education institutions can improve their support so that black women do not drop out prematurely.

My intention is to interview women who are close to submitting their theses, I initially thought of those who are in their final year, but I hear that is a bit tricky hence I intend to interview those who anticipate submitting within a year or less. I would appreciate your participating in this study if you fall within this category. Please let me know if you would like/afford to partake. My cell number is xxx xxx xxxx should you prefer we communicate via telephone.

Kind regards