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Permission to share what they think about racism: tutors reflect on encounters with students

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Abstract

This study uses critical race theory to examine interviews with university tutors, during which they reflect on teaching experiences with first-year students. These tutors are responsible for helping students to conceptualise racism as structural in the context of an introductory module in literary studies. The analysis maps the discourses tutors mobilised to assign meaning to the challenges and successes they experienced during their interactions with students. Analysing such interviews can contribute to critical race theory by illuminating how knowledge about racism is developed during tutor–student collaborations. The results elucidate how tutors attempt to make sense of an unforeseen measure of reluctance from students racialised as Black to discuss systemic racism and its impact on their lives. More specifically, the psychoanalytic concept *mentalisation* grounds my exploration of the various ways tutors engage different discourses to account for this reluctance. The same concept sheds light on tutors' capacity to reflect on their

own intersectional positionalities and its influence on students' learning. The article concludes by stressing that mentalisation is less fruitful, analytically speaking, when it is used to accuse individuals of falling short of some desired criterion such as critical thinking. Instead, the real danger arises when people are unable to mobilise a wide range of discourses capable of driving sophisticated interpretations. Specific suggestions are made for addressing this danger.

Keywords critical race theory; discourse analysis; racism; higher education; students; literature

Introduction

This article investigates the experiences of tutors at a South African university. These tutors guide first-year students through theorisations of racism as systemic in the context of an introductory module in literary studies designed for this purpose. Many scholars of critical race theory (CRT) focus on students' lived experiences and promote pedagogies that equip students to read their own lived experiences in relation to structural (dis)advantage (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Jones, 2021). This study expands CRT by discerning the discourses tutors use to assign meaning to their experiences with students. Tutors conduct weekly small-group discussions of 20–5 students using pedagogic strategies intended to actively involve students as co-producers of knowledge.

Potentially, such encounters between students and tutors can equip students to read their lived experiences in relation to broader asymmetric power relations. Given this potential, this study analyses individual interviews with tutors using the psychoanalytic concept *mentalisation*, as theorised and operationalised in discourse analyses by Kennedy and Young (2019). In brief, mentalisation reflects 'modes of psychic experience, in relation to race, as facilitated by different kinds of discursive practices ... in which the internal world is experienced as being separate from but nonetheless related to external reality' (Kennedy and Young, 2019, p. 7).

Mentalisation might open a fruitful window onto the tutor–student dynamic by theorising 'internal' and 'external' worlds as interpenetrating each other (Kennedy and Young, 2019, p. 13). Specifically, racism shapes both the intersubjective and the structural aspects of tutors' and students' lives. At an intersubjective level, tutors and students collaborate to understand how racism affects them individually and collectively. However, structural racism also impacts the institution in which these interactions occur. Mentalisation proved a generative concept for exploring tutors' readiness to examine this entanglement. However, it was only selected after its utility was suggested by a first round of data-driven, inductive coding of the interviews, following Rolon-Dow et al. (2022).

Three primary goals are addressed, to: (1) analyse the discourses tutors use to reflect on experiences with students; (2) discern how these discourses facilitate different forms of mentalisation; and (3) propose how these findings expand CRT. These goals flow from an established body of CRT research concerned with improving the anti-racist potential of higher education by investigating the discourses that mediate pedagogic exchanges (Jones, 2021; Rolon-Dow and Davison, 2020; Rolon-Dow et al., 2022; Vachon, 2022). Although this study is located at a South African university, it addresses questions of broader urgency that have incited interest from CRT scholars in multiple contexts (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2022).

The next section conceptualises mentalisation. Those that follow explicate the precepts of CRT, before justifying the selection of tutors as research participants. Tutors' responsibilities and institutional positionality are also outlined, before explicating the findings.

Methods

Mentalisation

Mentalisation conceptualises 'our minds as filters of our experience', which can be 'curious and reflective' or 'rigid and defensive' (Kennedy and Young, 2019, p. 15). Kennedy and Young (2019) combine mentalisation with discourse analytic frameworks from critical whiteness studies to probe discourses that enrich or impair mentalisation around racism. This section discusses the potential generativity of mentalisation in relation to interviews with tutors.

Mentalisation enables a reading of interview data along two lines: (1) the degree to which interviewees can frame the inner and outer aspects of experience as mutually constitutive; and (2) the degree to which interviewees can consider the implications of this entanglement for making sense of experience. To clarify, interviewees' appreciation of this relationship between the inner/subjective and outer/social can elevate or stymie critical reflection on material and discursive processes of racialisation. Critical, reflexive modes of mentalising are premised on:

a state of mind in which the internal world is experienced as being separate from but nonetheless related to external reality. Mental experience is recognised as influencing and being influenced by external reality, but there is also an understanding that it is not the same as external reality. (Kennedy and Young, 2019, p. 13)

In relation to racism, healthy mentalisation would recognise the complex entwinement between individual, relational and systemic dimensions of racism. For example, if students appear reluctant to discuss racism, sound mentalisation would attempt to consider how this behaviour is not simply individual but embedded in broader structures.

On this foundation, Kennedy and Young (2019) interrogate the discursive practices invoked by trainee clinical psychologists to assign meaning to race in therapeutic relationships. Their findings highlight a 'discourse of racial innocence' (Kennedy and Young, 2019, p. 21). It allows trainees to picture the therapeutic context as unsullied by racism. This stance compromises mentalisation by overlooking how a personal, defensive investment in a discourse of individual racial innocence stymies insight into the reality that therapeutic relationships are inevitably shaped by broader structures.

In short, mentalisation is curtailed when the impression that racism is absent from the immediate, interpersonal context is accepted unquestioningly, without engaging evidence that racism still stratifies society (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Kennedy and Young, 2019). Analytically speaking, the argument is that the discourses interviewees enact serve both a discursive and a psychic function. The former reflects and normalises power-evasive constructions of relationships and institutions. The latter does defensive work by implicitly denying personal implication in systemic racism. Kennedy and Young (2019) refer to such instances of compromised mentalising as 'non-mentalising modes of thought' (p. 13).

For the present study, this theorisation of mentalisation drives an appreciation that the discourses research participants employ during interviews can expand or impede a grasp of internal and external worlds as inherently enmeshed. More specifically, as tutors narrate experiences with students and explore different meaning-making practices around these experiences, they engage modes of mentalisation that can be considered 'curious and reflective' or 'defensive and rigid' (Kennedy and Young, 2019, p. 15).

The concept was selected after a first-level analysis of the interviews highlighted a common impression among tutors that students racialised as Black (who constitute a numerical majority among students) show an initial hesitancy to discuss racism as systemic, at least during group interactions. Tutors spent significant portions of the interviews attempting to account for this observation. Mentalisation furnished a productive means of exploring the discourses used to formulate explanations. For instance, do tutors depoliticise students by individualising and decontextualising their reluctance? Are students framed as academically deficient? Are tutors able to question their own meaning-making processes?

In relation to these questions, it must be mentioned that this study does not classify participants as capable of either sound or truncated mentalisation. Instead, taking its cue from Kennedy and Young (2019), the analysis focuses on discursive practices and the role some patterns play in facilitating mentalisation by reinforcing 'a mode of experiencing ourselves in relationship with others and others in relationship with ourselves' (p. 13). This approach is consequential, because the capacity to mentalise is context-dependent. Interactional settings that jeopardise participants' sense of security can hamper critical reflection. Tutors work under high pressure. For instance, tutors' limited control over module

outcomes and assessment methods, the potential discomfort of instigating conversations about racism and, of course, the challenge of participating in a research interview all mediate their capacities to mentalise.

Nevertheless, if adequate care is taken, interviews might also empower tutors to reflect on their experiences, which is vital since the normal pace of tutors' work with students does not allow enough time for such reflection. The interview process can equip tutors to consider multiple discursive practices and to sift through a spectrum of viewpoints, thus stimulating flexibility. Taking adequate care requires paying attention to the affective aspects of talk and an acknowledgement that 'affect can be understood as both "outside" and "inside"' (Kennedy and Young, 2019, p. 11) everyone who contributes to the exchange.

This study extends Kennedy and Young's (2019) work on clinical therapeutic settings into institutions of higher education. For this, the body of CRT studies on education proved indispensable, as explained next.

Critical race theory

CRT views commonplace interactions at institutions of higher education as imbricated in racialised systems of (dis)advantage. It also prizes everyday forms of resistance and solidarity. One priority is to theorise and expand openings for resistance from interdisciplinary perspectives (Rolon-Dow and Davison, 2020). This study proposes that tutorials can foster relationships where such openings can be cultivated. Although tutor–student interactions cannot unravel injustices on their own, CRT still values the cumulative effects they might secure. At the very least, tutorials might allow students and tutors to collaboratively demystify how power operates, thus yielding 'an entry point for disrupting the everyday ways that racism is normalised in institutions' (Rolon-Dow and Davison, 2020, p. 257). Adopting CRT has implications for the way research participants are approached. This section stipulates how the precepts of CRT inform this study.

First, CRT conceptualises racism as fundamentally systemic and intersectional. Consequently, the need for spaces where students can unpack racism is driven by the systemic scope of the issue (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Rolon-Dow and Davison, 2020). However, racialised issues are often silenced in South African classrooms. Direct, critical talk about the racialised (mal)distribution of resources, for example, is affectively charged. People racialised as white can leverage multiple discourses to deny or ignore the severity of racism. Racialised others who aim to interrogate racism risk being accused of irrational hypervigilance around race (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Kennedy and Young, 2019). How tutors navigate such environments warrants study.

Second, CRT centres experiential knowledge, asserting that members of racially subordinated communities develop vital insights into the operations of racism grounded in their lived realities. The module under study claims to allow students to set racialised experiences in conversation with the literary texts under study. During the training session I was permitted to observe, prior to conducting interviews, that tutors were instructed to facilitate this conversation by encouraging students to narrate experiential knowledge. During the interviews, I also attempted to express value for tutors' experiential knowledge. Doing so was intended to foster an opportunity for tutors to reflect on encounters with students, to discover frustrations and successes, and to explore areas for growth, following Jones (2021). In keeping with CRT, tutors' experiences are approached as legitimate sources for study, especially since tutors are undergoing a process of consolidating their emerging identities as educators in South Africa. For context, it should be mentioned that most of the tutors' groups consist exclusively of students racialised as Black or feature only a small number of other students.

Third, CRT is committed to social justice. One expression of this commitment involves translating theoretical insights into concrete practices, which includes investigating what happens when teachers collaborate with students to envisage racism as structural (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Jones, 2021). This study contributes by discerning how tutors discursively assign meaning to encounters with students, before proposing implications from a CRT perspective.

Rationale for selecting tutors

The tutors who participated in this study merit CRT research owing to their responsibility to introduce first-year students to understandings of racism as systemic by means of literary explorations of the issue (the texts are specified later). Many CRT studies have documented how some universities

sideline debates on racism (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2022; Vachon, 2022). By contrast, tutors are expected to investigate and deepen such discussions, affording an opportunity for scholars to ascertain how this endeavour unfolds.

Tutors face a combination of autonomy and limitations. On the one hand, they cannot influence the prescribed readings, module outcomes or assessment methods. They must elicit students' views on racism, build on students' in-class contributions and encourage student–student collaboration, aiming to cultivate insight into the systemic character of racism. On the other, the training session that I attended underscored the freedom they are given to experiment with pedagogic strategies for invigorating active participation from the 20–25 students assigned to each tutor. They are required to measure students' strengths, weaknesses and needs, and to respond sensitively, but exactly how they should do this is left to them, although various strategies are discussed. How tutors navigate such requirements is under-researched. Many recent CRT studies foreground students or pre-service teachers (Hawkman, 2022; Rolon-Dow et al., 2022; Vachon, 2022). Few focus on tutors.

Mindful of these points of interest, I requested permission from the professor who designed and taught the module, the departmental chair, the tutors, and the institutional review board to explore tutors' reflections on their interactions with students. I was permitted to observe an annual training session and weekly tutor–professor meetings, but not to observe tutorials. My remit centres on the discursive practices through which tutors frame their encounters with students during individual interviews.

Tutors' institutional positionality

This study designates the research participants as tutors instead of their institutionally mandated titles to protect their anonymity. Tutors are appointed in the department under study to solve a problem engendered by rising student enrolments without a proportionate increase in fully employed teaching staff. The consequence of higher student numbers is that official lectures are presented to hundreds of students at a time, which compromises efforts to treat students as active knowledge producers since they remain passive recipients of information during lectures. Tutors are appointed to alleviate this danger by giving students opportunities to collaboratively generate knowledge in small groups.

Since the module under study is designed to introduce students to literary explorations of the systemic features of racism, tutors are instructed to recognise silences around racism, to break these sensitively and to recognise discourses that deny the severity of contemporary racism, if such problems arise. Uncovering such silences or denials is a chief concern for CRT, making it crucial to research tutors' reflections on their work with students.

These expectations are high. Tutors must respond in sophisticated and flexible ways to the students' strengths, needs and challenges. Simultaneously, tutors are employed via annually renewable contracts and do not enjoy the security of full-time employment. For this reason, few tutors reapply for their positions for more than six consecutive years.

Tutors' responsibilities

Tutors do not deliver lectures. Instead, they support lectures presented by the full-time professor who designed the module and trained the tutors. Groups of 20–25 students meet with a tutor twice per week for one-hour sessions. During the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2), tutorials were conducted online. Additionally, tutors host a weekly virtual consultation for an hour. Weekly meetings with the professor in charge of the module provide opportunities to discuss how students are progressing.

For assessment, tutors grade multiple oral and written assignments on a bi-weekly basis. Assessments aim to gradually scaffold students' writing and argumentation skills. All assessments are moderated by the professor who designed the module, and by another full-time staff member.

Tutors undergo training intended to equip them to engage students as collaborative producers of knowledge instead of passive recipients of institutionally approved information.¹ They are responsible for assisting students with debating how literary texts open perspectives onto systemic racism and for helping them question the relationship between this knowledge and their own lived experiences. Examining how tutors pursue these objectives speaks to the CRT proposition that small-group interactions in higher education can animate students' critical consciousness (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2022; Hawkman, 2022; Jones, 2021; Rolon-Dow and Davison, 2020; Rolon-Dow et al., 2022; Vachon, 2022).

Tutors play a pivotal role in this process. Their training is intended to enable them to respond sensitively and effectively to students' needs, including the discomfort that might arise when unearthing how literary texts envisage racism as systemic. The discourses tutors invoke to make sense of their activities with students can illuminate some of the promises and problems of small-group interactions. The potential value of such research is increased by the fact that although the professor responsible for designing the module suggests broad discussion topics for each tutorial, tutors are permitted to deviate in response to students' interests. They are also largely autonomous with respect to the specific teaching techniques they select to treat students as agentic knowledge producers. The rationale for the freedom given to tutors is that they are required to become familiar enough with students to determine the techniques that are most likely to actively involve them. Tutorials focus on Mahole Mashigo's (2018) collection of short stories and Sherman Alexie's (2007) novel *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*.

Recruitment

When students are admitted to the department's programme for postgraduate literary and cultural studies, they are also asked to apply for a position as tutor. Consequently, all tutors are also graduate students who have completed a first degree with the department in question.

All tutors have completed coursework on CRT, feminist theories and ecocriticism prior to teaching the module that contextualises this study. This education might influence how they collaborate with students, and it seems reasonable to harbour higher expectations of tutors' capacity for critical thinking and self-reflection compared with the undergraduates who participate in many other CRT studies (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2022; Hawkman, 2022; Vachon, 2022).

Author positionality

I self-identify as white and cis-male, an intersectional positionality imbricated in inequitable power relations. Following Corces-Zimmerman and Guida's (2019) concrete guidelines, this necessitates self-reflection throughout the research process, notably by attending to the influence of whiteness and patriarchy. One way in which this is attempted is by treating interviews as co-constructed, as demonstrated during the analysis. Another step involved first discussing the findings with participants prior to completing the manuscript. During a collective debriefing session, followed by individual sessions, tutors were invited to critique and refine the analyses and conclusions.

Racial classifications in this article should be read not as monolithic but as discursively produced, historically contingent and embroiled in asymmetric power relations with material repercussions. When tutors are identified along racialised and gendered axes, it reflects self-selected identification. It also reflects tutors' alertness that regardless of their preferred self-identifications, South African students are likely to identify them along axes that are commonplace for this context. Moreover, such identifications mediate the tutor–student relationship (Adonis and Silinda, 2021).

Additionally, my field of study is CRT, not literary studies. In preparation for undertaking this research, I scrutinised all the prescribed texts and verified my interpretation both of the texts and of tutors' responsibilities with the professor in charge, the departmental chair and the tutors.

Interview procedures

Individual interviews were selected over focus groups to give participants more freedom to discuss their relationships with fellow tutors and the professor who taught the module. All 15 tutors employed for 2021–2 consented to participate. A group of 15 participants compares favourably with similar qualitative discourse-based research, including Kennedy and Young (2019), Rolon-Dow and Davison (2020) and Vachon (2022).

Eleven tutors had only acquired one year of teaching experience prior to joining the study. Two others had four years, and the remaining two had seven. Fourteen tutors self-identify as female and one as male. Three self-identify as Black, two as coloured and ten as white. During the interviews, all tutors expressed an understanding of race as socially constructed. Yet they also expounded how their exchanges with students complicated their interpretation of what this approach to race entails. To clarify, tutors expressed an appreciation that regardless of their own personal identifications, South African

students are likely to racialise them vis-à-vis the racial categories that have been normalised in everyday discourse, which are white, Black and coloured. This coheres with existing CRT studies in South African institutions (Adonis and Silinda, 2021). As discussed during the findings, tutor–student interactions both reflect and contribute to racialisation. How this impacts tutorial exchanges and mentalisation is pivotal for unpacking the findings.

Individual interviews lasted around 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured questionnaire that was supplied to tutors one month prior to each interview. Semi-structured approaches support consistency in topics while also prioritising respect for participants' agency, allowing them to pursue unique, unexpected avenues of interest as they recount and interpret experiences (Rolon-Dow et al., 2022). All interviews covered the following areas:

- the specific pedagogic techniques each tutor uses to instigate and deepen discussions about systemic racism and the literary texts under study
- how tutors supply feedback on oral and written assessments
- how tutors' racialised, gendered and intersectional positionalities might mediate interactions with students
- how tutors labour to stimulate active participation from students, and what triumphs and setbacks they have experienced in this regard.

All participants were explicitly and repeatedly invited to deviate from this sequence into avenues that they consider relevant. Interviews were intentionally conducted with respect for participants' knowledge, experience and capacity as critical thinkers. While discussing the last topic, all tutors shared an observation that is the linchpin of this article. Without being explicitly asked about it, all tutors expressed various degrees of discomfort and frustration over what they articulated as an initial and surprising lack of enthusiasm to discuss racism as systemic from students racialised as Black (who constitute a majority among students). How tutors engage modes of mentalisation around this topic is a key theme of the findings.

Methodologically, interviews are conceptualised as 'interactions in which speakers are performing various activities' instead of 'a neutral conduit for extracting information' from participants (Kerr, 2020, p. 111). Said differently, interviews function as exchanges during which the participants and interviewer co-construct knowledge as the exchange unfolds. Participants are encouraged not only to recount experiences, but also to experiment with a wide spectrum of discursive practices for assigning meaning to experiences. Potentially, this approach might induce participants to interrogate how they relate to students, how they perceive their role vis-à-vis students, how they respond to the knowledge students generate, and the institutional limitations imposed on their role as tutors.

Acting as the interviewer demands continuous self-reflexivity on my part, notably with regard to my own structural positionality as white and male, since it will impact on the discourses participants choose to mobilise. In response, and in adherence to CRT recommendations, I attempted to prioritise an open attentiveness to participants' concerns. Following Rolon-Dow and Davison (2020), the interviews 'prioritised a listening response to participants' shared experiences and communicated value for [their] distinctive knowledge' (p. 246).

Discourse analytic procedures

CRT offers multiple discourse analytic frameworks for facilitating 'a critical conversation between theory and data' (Kerr, 2020, p. 111). This section details the procedures that underpinned my analysis of the interviews.

First, specific concepts from CRT were not selected prior to an initial stage of data-driven, inductive coding, following the iterative procedures employed by Adu-Gyamfi et al. (2022), Hawkman (2022) and Rolon-Dow et al. (2022). This open-ended approach recognises that the discourses that emerge from interviews are never 'self-evidently about any particular topic' and can be analysed along multiple lines by setting theory in dialogue with data (Kerr, 2020, p. 111).

Second, the above-mentioned iterative process begins by listening to audio recordings of the interviews and reading the transcripts multiple times to enhance familiarity. Next, a second stage of reading and listening records themes in the data. Following Kennedy and Young (2019), Kerr (2020) and Vachon (2022), the process of inferring themes from the interviews was impelled by the tenets of CRT. To clarify, themes are identified by considering how they speak to principal interests in CRT.

Therefore, CRT mediates what analysts look for, while simultaneously recognising that data might speak back to theory along potentially unanticipated tangents (Kerr, 2020). In more concrete terms, the data were examined for the degree to which they address questions including the following. How are race and racism discursively constructed? What forms of racialised discomfort do tutors experience when teaching about racism? How do they create meaning around this discomfort? What hurdles do they encounter as they labour to hone students' grasp of racism as systemic, and what successes have they experienced? How are broader institutional arrangements implicated in racism? How are racialised subjectivities constructed vis-à-vis the student-tutor relationship?

The interview data remain open to multiple readings, but for this article, I argue that they elucidate discursive practices, which facilitate modes of mentalising about tutors' efforts to involve students as active knowledge producers about the nature of structural racism.

Results

All participants have been anonymised, using pseudonyms. The first portion of my results section focuses on interviews with tutors identifying as Black women and coloured women. Several commonalities surfaced in the discursive framing of their intersectional positionalities and associated modes of mentalisation.

Permission to share what they think

The concept mentalisation highlights how tutors attend to the mutually constitutive interplay between inner and outer aspects of experience as they assign meaning to encounters with students. Tutors who self-identify as Black women and coloured women reflect on this enmeshment by configuring students as individuals who cannot be disconnected from wider structures. Such reflections emerged when tutors explained how they stimulate conversation among students:

I get them to participate by asking provocative questions like are characters poor because they are Black or because they are lazy? These questions provoke opinions especially from Black students. I do think the fact that students see me as a Black woman lets me show them they are allowed to share what they think instead of having to censor themselves which I think they learn to do elsewhere on campus. (Letsha)

I ask difficult questions to show students that talking is okay. Because I don't think that's true everywhere on campus. For example, why are some characters made to feel like they don't belong in certain spaces? How does that speak to real life? It takes students a long time to start saying openly that it's racialised. But I think being seen by students as a coloured woman gives me more legitimacy. (Gina)

Tutors clarify the intended function of 'provocative' or 'difficult' questions and then engage their own intersectional positionalities. That is, 'as a Black woman' or 'as a coloured woman', they believe students are more likely to accept them as authorities on racism because they can speak from experiential knowledge. This approach contrasts sharply with participants in Kennedy and Young (2019), who leverage a discourse of racial innocence, which disconnects interpersonal interactions from broader sociopolitical issues affecting South Africa. The tutors' reflections on how to actively involve students in creating knowledge locates the exchange in a wider, institutional context. They foreground the likelihood that students' experiences 'elsewhere on campus' might have predisposed them to 'censor themselves'. This observation aligns with extensive CRT research suggesting that students often learn that deliberations about racism should be avoided or kept superficial (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Hawkman, 2022).

Mindful of this contextual embeddedness, these tutors respond by proactively venturing into potentially uncomfortable terrain, using 'provocative' and 'difficult' questions intended to stimulate students into responding. Given their authority as tutors, responsible for setting the tone and direction of the conversation, venturing into these questions might help to normalise candid engagement with topics that could be censored outside tutorials. Moreover, they aver that their intersectional positionalities might encourage students to consider them receptive to critical views on racism. Said differently, instead of decontextualising and depoliticising students' initial silence, they appreciate that students might need permission to openly discuss racism owing to institutional arrangements that discourage candour.

This is the first module where students are allowed to link personal experience with texts on racism, so I need to show them it is permitted. It took until the middle of the semester for students to believe that I really wanted to hear their honest opinions. (Letsha)

In some of their writing, students do say how they know what the characters go through is real because similar things happen to them. I did encourage them openly to elaborate on those links, but only if they are comfortable sharing because sharing might be too intense in some cases, I think. I don't think they would have done if I had not invited it. (Gina)

In terms of mentalisation, tutors' emphasis on giving students permission and encouragement to discuss racism reflects a recognition that individual students work under structural impediments. In response, tutors attempt to model critical candour. Their responses evince a dual awareness that the tutor–student relationship is impacted both by such structures and by the positionalities from which tutors speak, including racialised and gendered subjectivities. As such, these tutors acknowledge that students may have been enculturated to accept self-censorship, and they attempt to mitigate the stifling impact of this censorship. Individual students are thus understood in relation to external structures.

However, tutors also encounter resistance in relation to the intersectional subject positions from which they speak. In what follows, I explore these problems as broached by tutors who identify as Black and female, since they were the only tutors whose groups did not consist exclusively of Black-identifying students.

But that advantage of being a Black woman who says provocative things only comes with my Black students. White students don't take so well with the way I go about discussions. They find me exhausting and go silent. (Atile)

During the interview, this tutor (and those she represents) discussed the vulnerability she feels when white students 'go silent'. She also acknowledges the vulnerability students might experience, thus positioning herself as both affecting and affected by them. Subsequently, she interprets this affectively charged response as follows.

It's difficult to mediate between Black students who are a majority in my groups and who respond as if I have given them permission to finally share what they are thinking and white students. It's unnerving for me when they go silent, but I think they feel like they can't participate because they don't think or feel what Black students do so they think they won't be heard. I don't know how to bring them out of that because I do want to hear from them. (Atile)

Here the tutor expresses vulnerability about the challenges involved in prompting white students to collaborate with Black peers. She frames white students' predilection to 'go silent' as impelled by their inability to 'think or feel what Black students do'. On the one hand, proposing that white students struggle when encountering knowledge about racism certainly accords with CRT, even if she does not invoke that theory here. On the other, in terms of mentalisation, her meaning-making efforts around white students show less nuance than her insight into Black students' reactions to provocative questions, since she does not embed white students' silence in a richer context that accounts for white privilege.

CRT projects in South Africa and elsewhere have documented how institutions of higher learning tacitly prioritise the affective comfort of white students by means of institutionalised whiteness (Adonis and Silinda, 2021). It is therefore possible that some white students only encounter such candour around racism during these tutorials. Moreover, some of these encounters between white students and theorisations of racism are facilitated by Black women tutors who pose 'provocative' questions. Under such conditions, silence can be a power-evasive strategy, and yet such considerations are absent from interviews with the three tutors who identify as Black women. However, to account for this the interview context must be implicated, as explained next.

As Kennedy and Young (2019) stress, interviews constitute sites where knowledge is discursively co-produced, which mediates the capacity to mentalise. As the interviewer, I could have supported deeper exploration, prompting the tutors to weigh more nuanced accounts for white students' silence. This, in turn, could have sharpened insight into white privilege while concurrently resisting a homogenised reading of white students. Instead, my interviews with these tutors concentrated more

heavily on their experiences with Black students, since tutors were keen to discuss these students' initial hesitation. Fortunately, the three tutors who identify as Black women pointed this out during post-interview debriefing sessions and, in response, they broached a series of more textured readings. These are discussed below.

Reflecting on resistance

Some white students may fall silent because learning about racism threatens their sense of individual, moral selfhood by revealing how individuals are embedded in unjust social structures. Silence, thus understood, is not an innocent disagreement or epistemic aphasia, but instead reflects white fragility and a subtle collusion with racism. As Adu-Gyamfi et al. (2022) put it, these racially evasive silences from white students are 'the surface responses [or] the outward expression of an underlying white emotionality such as shame' (p. 74). Nonetheless, some white students may, over time, come to comprehend that 'provocative' pedagogic techniques are needed, since they model the candour and vulnerability that is exigent for naming oppression and enriching knowledge.

Finally, some white students may remain silent during tutorials owing to the dynamics involved in speaking to fellow students and to tutors who possess experiential knowledge about racism. To clarify, some white students might consider their own contributions superfluous or even offensive, as a means of recentring whiteness in a space where lived experiences of marginalisation should be prioritised.

In short, tutors showcased a capacity to reflect carefully on encounters with white students, and specifically for reading students' silence as emanating not only from discomfort in the moment, but also from racist stratification, which sustains white fragility. Doing so is necessary since tutors might encounter these enactments of white fragility in future tutorials and in their professional futures more broadly. However, white fragility must also be meaningfully problematised by the institutions that employ tutors, instead of foisting this labour on tutors exclusively.

Speaking versus writing

The tutors cited below all identify as white and female. CRT interrogations of whiteness have uncovered multiple discourses that enable white-identifying subjects to downplay the severity of racism and/or to construct racialised others as deficient (Hawkman, 2022; Kennedy and Young, 2019; Vachon, 2022). Given this danger, the discursive resources that shape mentalisation among white tutors warrant study. This section maps how white-identifying tutors make sense of interactions with students.

My sense is that they know that systemic racism exists, but they won't acknowledge it openly during sessions or discuss how it affects them. They will mention how some Black characters are poor or feel alienated, but they won't tie this to racism even though some students probably experience something like this. (Eva)

Students are very careful and very awkward talking about racism as anything more than micro-aggressions. When they talk about poverty in the texts, they don't link it to racism. Only the most obvious forms of racist name-calling are called racist. (Amanda)

My students are very reluctant to talk about anything more than name-calling and individual prejudice in the texts. They seem wary to talk about racism as systemic as it affects characters or as it personally relates to them. (Cindy)

None of these white-identifying interviewees assert that students lack the academic aptitude to theorise racism as systemic. Instead of framing students as inadequate, tutors report a willingness among students to discuss the hardships endured by characters, but a commensurate reluctance to read these privations as fundamentally and systemically racialised. However, ten of the 14 tutors who self-identify as white and female observed a disjunction between students' verbal participation during tutorials and the writing projects they submitted for assessment.

I think students are nervous with complex issues like racism where finding words to express yourself honestly and sensitively is hard, but what I noticed over time is even though they say little during tutorials they write about racism in more depth. Writing is where students link

personal experiences of poverty with racism as more than prejudice. They make arguments about how the texts depict racism and substantiate their arguments by using personal experience. (Amanda)

In writing students developed a formula. First they discuss how primary texts treat racism. Then they explain how the texts engage the world as they experience it including poverty as racism. So, in writing they are more comfortable compared to speaking to an audience, even when its writing for assessment, which can be intimidating. (Cindy)

When requested to elaborate on this dichotomy between verbal participation during tutorials and writing for assessment, tutors attempt to situate individual students within the interactional contexts and structures that mediate how students engage the texts.

I read a bunch of touching and even heart-breaking essays about students or their families experiencing systemic racism. It looks to me like students were more comfortable sharing such stories in essays that only I will read. In feedback I told them that I would like to see who they are as students in relation to the texts if they are comfortable sharing like that. (Amanda)

I can understand why students might not want to speak up during sessions with other students around. I think a lot of students are really hurt by what happens to them. When they start writing, some of them seem to forget about the assessor, as if they are allowed a sort of safe space to voice things. (Cindy)

It's as if writing makes them feel like they are not just student numbers but people in ways that don't work with an audience listening. That's my impression from assessing their writing. (Eva)

Viewed through the lens of mentalisation, these attempts by tutors to account for students' responses show promise in some respects, while also remaining problematic.

At one level, tutors demonstrate some critical reflection by carefully marking their accounts with uncertainty. Hedges such as 'It looks to me', 'I think' and 'That's my impression' are common. Stronger qualifying statements are also present, including 'This is what I think but I don't know as much about my students as I'd like' or 'There is so much about them I don't know, but I think'. For Kennedy and Young (2019), uncertainty can reinforce healthy mentalisation if it signals an openness for further exploration beyond the explanations that are immediately felt to be reasonable or true.

More strikingly, the tutors attempt to situate students' responses in a broader socio-historical context – certainly to a more advanced degree than participants in Kennedy and Young (2019). Students are not castigated as academically deficient, which is noteworthy, since deficit discourses surface regularly in research on whiteness and its imbrication in neoliberal ideologies that frame universities as race-neutral bastions of meritocracy (Adonis and Silinda, 2021; Hawkman, 2022). Nor is it suggested that students do not talk about racism because we live in a post-racial world in which students no longer experience racism – claims that have also been reported in studies on whiteness (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2022). In short, tutors do not individualise students. Instead, tutors acknowledge the structural character of racism by actively considering the likelihood that Black students' lives are marked by injustice. Relatedly, they attempt to recognise the likelihood that uncovering and discussing the impact of racism on their lives is a painful, face-threatening process for students, prompting them to devote more energy to analysing racism as both structural and personal in writing rather than in group interactions.

Premised on these considerations, the tutors' most common discourse for understanding students is to see them as uncomfortable with an overhearing audience when attempting to read racism as both systemic and personally relevant. Moreover, tutors cite some evidence to support this interpretation by asserting that students showed a stronger aptitude during writing compared with speaking. In writing, more students linked the texts under study with systemic racism and with personal experience. This prompts tutors to postulate that writing yielded a comparatively higher degree of freedom from anxiety.

Another level at which tutors frame students' behaviour as impacted by the interpenetration of inner and outer worlds is by recognising the value of encouragement and permission.

In feedback I told them that I would like to see who they are as students in relation to the texts if they are comfortable sharing like that. (Amanda)

I did invite them to keep doing this in writing if they were comfortable, telling them that it is perfectly acceptable. (Miranda)

I am not sure whether they would have kept doing it if I did not say it was okay. (Sophy)

Such moves to explicitly grant permission proved common among all tutors, regardless of racialised and gendered identifications. Its pervasiveness suggests a capacity for mentalising about students in relation to structures that necessitate explicit encouragement to explore racism and to link the literary texts under study with lived realities. Put differently, tutors assert that students need such encouragement because they do not necessarily receive it elsewhere on campus. However, the modes of mentalisation that are facilitated by the above-mentioned discourses also reflect potential shortfalls, as argued next.

Interrogating positionality

In addition to the above-mentioned dichotomy between speaking and writing, most of the tutors, regardless of gendered and racialised identification, also aver two additional explanations for students' difficulty with openly discussing systemic racism during tutorials.

One is that online interactions necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic stunted the development of a sense of community and solidarity needed for collaborative knowledge production around racism.

I asked and most of my students have never met each other in person because of Covid. Talking about racism like this is potentially painful. Why would students share something so personal and painful with people who even by the middle of semester are still strangers? But when they write, maybe it's different. (Miranda)

Here tutors reflect on the contextual factors that shape student participation and they focus on the value of nurturing community among students. The value of community is then linked to observations about module design.

Although the module in which this study is situated explicitly invites students to examine systemic racism by setting prescribed texts in conversation with experiences, the other modules students have completed to date do not openly welcome this practice. Even tutors who relied on 'provocative' and 'difficult' questions, as mentioned earlier, insisted that most students showed a stronger aptitude for linking systemic racism with lived realities in their writing, and they aver that this difference is impelled by the lack of broader institutional support for this kind of thinking among students.

In other modules I tutor, working with personal views on the texts and how it links to personal experiences are not part of the deal. (Cindy)

In other modules there is no space for connecting texts with personal and community knowledge. Students are not invited to relate to the stories at that level. (Letscha)

The argument is that students have not been rigorously acclimatised to this pedagogic approach. Interventions from those invested with the institutional authority to optimise the conditions under which tutors work are thus needed. Read through the lens of mentalisation, these reflections suggest that tutors have developed an appreciation of the collective and individual barriers students must overcome to undergo the discomfiting and even painful process of exploring racism as a force that structures their academic and personal lives. While literary texts can provide perspectives on such realities, using them to teach about systemic racism cannot be done effectively without attempting to mitigate the complications that tutors and students experience together.

However, across the interviews, an omission became evident from tutors who identify as white. In contrast to those identifying as Black women and coloured women, reflections on intersectional positionality and its possible impact on teaching were muted. When asked, white tutors admitted a degree of risk.

I do tell my students that I am a white woman. That is my experience in life. I do know that not everyone is going to relate to me. Some of them will feel that I do not understand. (Cindy)

I do think there is a risk that some of the Black students might feel that as a white person I would not understand them when they link the texts with their own worlds. (Miranda)

These portions of the interviews saw tutors deliver brief responses, even when encouraged to elaborate. What emerges is not a fully-fledged version of the discourse of racial innocence as documented by Kennedy and Young (2019). Participants do not fully disconnect themselves from racism, but their capacity to situate themselves in a wider context is truncated. Mentalisation is thus compromised by closing it down beyond a certain point. Put differently, there is a danger that white tutors might treat the process of teaching about racism to predominantly Black students as sufficient on its own, allowing them to circumvent further critical work on the self. Listening to and reading about students' lived realities is then framed as an end point. Analysing these sections of the interviews using a CRT approach to mentalisation surfaces how white tutors struggle to reflect substantively on the subtle operations of whiteness at both individual and institutional levels, and the entwinement between the two.

To clarify, tutors admit that racism is systemic. They also express value for the experiential knowledge offered by students, especially students who confront racism in everyday life. They concede that being white might hinder cooperation with students who face racism. Although these observations cohere with recommendations from CRT and are important steps towards critical consciousness, more penetrating implications for future pedagogic exchanges prove difficult to explore and to articulate during the interviews.

A wealth of CRT scholarship explicates how white educators must move beyond simply expressing awareness of institutional racism. What is necessary is a critical engagement with the danger that their own teaching practices can reify prevailing inequities. To decentre whiteness in education, white educators are encouraged to undergo an ongoing learning process. This includes rendering themselves open and vulnerable to the epistemic positions from which students speak, especially if minoritised students expose white educators' embeddedness in oppressive systems – as students might in the module under study (Hawkman, 2022; Rolon-Dow et al., 2022; Vachon, 2022). It seems unlikely that training procedures have rigorously equipped tutors to delve into these complexities. From the perspective of mentalisation, this limitation is disclosed by a sparse range of discursive resources helping tutors to envision and untangle the relationship between their own, subjective experiences of tutorial sessions and institutionalised whiteness.

However, the interview context must be implicated here, again. Tutors were fully apprised of the researcher's scholarly interests. For white tutors, this could heighten anxiety by highlighting the risk of being called racist, thus aggravating their difficulties with reflecting critically beyond simply mentioning that 'not everyone is going to relate to me'. Additionally, considering tutors' liminal position and lack of power to produce change beyond the circumscriptions of their immediate pedagogic interactions with students, it is also possible that tutors were uncertain about how to reflect more substantively on their own whiteness. Nonetheless, this result pinpoints how training procedures might be improved. Mentalisation reminds scholars about the complexities of affect, and that tutors' capacity to frame their own positionality in relation to broader systems must be supported more robustly, possibly by using anonymised case studies from CRT research including the present study.

Although Kennedy and Young (2019) address a markedly different context compared with the present study, specific tangents of their argument are nevertheless relevant, as discussed next.

Conclusion

Kennedy and Young (2019) stress that mentalisation is less fruitful, analytically, when it is used to accuse individuals of compromised mentalisation and of falling short of some desired criteria. Instead, they underscore that 'the danger is not necessarily in the adoption of particular kinds of talk' but in 'the lack of flexibility or access to a range of possible discourses' (Kennedy and Young, 2019, p. 30) that could animate more sophisticated reflections. This viewpoint mediates my interpretation of the discourses that emerged from the interviews.

A discourse analysis of the interviews discloses how participants could read certain aspects of their interactions with students as inevitably situated at the nexus between micro and macro forces – between individuals and wider, inequitable structures. Participants were able to formulate nuanced understandings of students by attending to the impact of systemic dispensations on individual needs. Participants also admitted the limitations of their own knowledge and reasoning about students. For instance, this capacity was revealed when tutors tried to grasp why students could advance stronger

insights during writing than in verbal interactions with peers, while admitting that 'There is so much about them I don't know'.

Nevertheless, in other areas, the discursive resources tutors could mobilise were less rich. Earlier sections suggested that the findings of this study can improve training procedures. For example, tutors can be supported to reflect critically and substantively on their experiences with students and on the practical implications of the way they assign meaning to these experiences. However, while it is crucial to improve training methods, it is also problematic to suggest that any kind of training can prepare tutors completely for future evolutions in education. The tensions, uncertainties and discomfort that might arise when co-creating knowledge with students are difficult to predict. Still, it seems likely that tutors would benefit from more spaces where reflections can be shared, untangled and deepened. Participating in research studies, when available, is insufficient, especially when regular, institutionally supported opportunities can be tailored to tutors' needs more efficaciously. Creating these opportunities for reflection can enrich the array of discourses to which tutors have access, thus sharpening their capacities to mentalise.

Such opportunities could involve collective, group-based discussions, and more individualised one-on-one mentorships, which in turn invite further research to explore the promises and shortcomings of such projects. It should be noted that the purpose is not simply to expand the spectrum of discourses tutors can mobilise. It is also vital that tutors learn to recognise the affective entanglements that hinder mentalisation, including the discomfort of reflecting on personal implications in racist structures. Viewing racism as fundamentally systemic and institutionalised entails that institutions must shoulder responsibility for supporting tutors' growth.

Relatedly, it is also paramount to provide targeted support for tutors who undertake unique forms of affective labour because they not only teach about racism, but also navigate its repercussions in their own lives. For them, engaging students who are racialised along many different axes entails 'mediating' between those who are eager to receive 'permission to finally share what they are thinking' and those who resist being confronted with racialised (dis)advantage. CRT would also recommend that future research explore how students experience the tutor–student dynamic.

Note

- ¹ Citing the manual and training procedures would identify the institution, department and participants, violating the guidelines for ethical research.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of the Free State ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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