Entangled identities: ”I want to set colour aside and I don’t want that type of thing anymore.”

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Post structuralist perspectives on race view it as a social construct, an outcome of the colonial project which sought to categorise and rank people in a hierarchy naturalising a view of whites or 'Europeans’ as superior to other races. Although apartheid officially ended in 1994, race as a primary marker of identity has continued to influence many aspects of private and public life in a post-apartheid South Africa: debates on race and equity permeate our public discourses. This study was conceived in an attempt to understand how youth at a South African tertiary institution position themselves within this landscape: Which discourses do they use? How do they position themselves in relation to fellow South Africans, particularly in terms of racial identification? Is there any evidence of new discourses which destabilise the racial boundaries and suggest new ways of relating and belonging.

My data includes seven focus group interviews with students from across the demographic range, conducted between 2009 and 2013. Given that the data are very complex and often contradictory, I use the narrative analysis tool of `small stories’ as developed by Bamberg, Georgakopoulou and De Fina to explore the complex ways in which people’s identities are shaped by and constitutive of both the interactional micro context as well as the broader macro social processes. The analysis shows that despite the fact that the master narrative of apartheid was officially discredited after 1994, and despite the participants’ stated desire to move beyond this way of thinking and talking, their talk is still structured according to the apartheid logic of racial hierarchy and difference. This paper also reflects on the extent to which the data reveal `faultlines’ along the boundaries of the established racialised discourses, and concludes by drawing on Nuttall’s (2009) conceptual metaphor of “entanglements” as a possible way forward.

Keywords: discourse, youth, race.