

## Living on the Margins: A University Student's Narratives of Social Isolation

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### ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized world, universities have become more diverse, contributing to the challenge of students experiencing a sense of belonging. Students not acknowledged for who they are may feel rejected, isolated, and lonely. Furthermore, the struggle to fit in becomes even greater if students experience rejection and social exclusion before joining higher education. With limited social capital, minority students withdraw and become disengaged. This longitudinal study uses a narrative approach to explore the social isolation experiences of a white, Afrikaans-speaking male student on a diverse university campus in South Africa. Data were generated over four years using reflexive exercises and semi-structured interviews. Drawing on Erikson's psychosocial theory and Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, the participant's experiences of social isolation were analyzed. The finding revealed continuous rejection leads to social isolation and a life on the margins.

### KEYWORDS

Social isolation; rejection; social exclusion; social capital;  
narratives.

## INTRODUCTION

Belonging and inclusion at higher education institutions have received much attention in recent decades. Due to an increase in the diverse student population, research focused on the importance of inclusion, accessibility, and the experience of a sense of belonging in higher education (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021; Pedler et al., 2022). However, limited research has been done on the social isolation of students (Bergin & Pakenham, 2015; Irani et al., 2014). Furthermore, most studies on social isolation frame it from a Western viewpoint (Zavaleta & Samuel, 2014). Research on social isolation focused mainly on older people, using a cross-sectional approach. This longitudinal study acknowledges the presence of social isolation within the context of higher education in South Africa. The study explores the experiences of a student who experiences social isolation during certain stages of his life. The following central research question framed the study: How did a male student experience social isolation during certain developmental stages? The objectives of the study were to describe the childhood experiences of a male student and to discuss the experiences of social isolation of male student in a higher education context.

In the first part of the article, we provide an overview of the concept of the need to belong, rejection, bullying, victimization, and social isolation in higher institutions. A discussion of the theoretical framework follows this: Erikson's psychosocial theory (1964; 1968) and Tajfel and Turner's (2004) social identity theory. After presenting the research design, we present the participant's narratives to illustrate their experiences of rejection and social isolation.

### ***The need to belong***

The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, driving people to form and maintain meaningful and lasting relationships. This universal drive leads individuals to seek connections, commit to relationships, and avoid being alone (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Forming new social bonds brings joy, while the loss of these bonds causes anxiety and grief. This need explains why neglect, rejection, exclusion, stigmatization, and ostracism cause distress. People with a strong network of close relationships, such as lovers, friends, family, and co-workers, tend to have higher self-esteem and greater life satisfaction compared to those who are more isolated (Kassin et al., 2014). Additionally, socially connected individuals are generally healthier and tend to live longer.

Affiliating with others provides energy, attention, stimulation, information, and emotional support (Baumeister et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2006). According to Baumeister et al. (2022), the need to belong is considered a necessity rather than a mere desire. This is because when this need is unmet, people experience more than just unhappiness; they face significant health issues, including an increased risk of death. Individuals who are isolated have more physical and mental health problems compared to those who are part of a robust social network. Feeling connected to a strong social network makes life seem more meaningful. A significant part of people's self-worth comes from their identification with groups, which is why group membership and the value of those groups are so important to them. Consequently,

being rejected by a group is one of life's most painful experiences and can severely damage an individual's sense of belonging (Baumeister et al., 2022; Kassin et al., 2014; Muldoon et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2006; Weiten & Hassim, 2022).

Self-esteem depends on both personal identity and social identity. Self-concept and social identity mutually determine and shape each other. This explains why rejection by peers is one of the most painful childhood experiences and can lead to low self-esteem, social isolation, and loneliness (Tamba & Iancu, 2023; Taylor et al., 2006; Weiten & Hassim, 2022).

### ***Rejection, bullying, and victimisation***

Rejection refers to the denial of social relationships. In rejection, the excluded person wanted to form a social bond. For example, a gay teenager who is excluded from group work activities, may experience social exclusion (Blackhart et al., 2009). The term ostracism refers to an individual being rejected, excluded, or ignored by other people. An individual who is repeatedly or continuously ostracized by others over a long period may experience various problems, including illness, depression, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, and feelings of helplessness. They may develop low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness. This highlights the crucial point that humans are naturally designed to be accepted into social groups and relationships. Rejection diminishes an individual's sense of belonging (Baumeister et al., 2022; Kassin et al., 2014; Omojonle, 2023; Taylor et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, a lot of people experience rejection because of their cultural background and their home language. For example, for many children it is a huge adjustment to start at a new school with a different culture and language to his/her own. A lot of these children will experience rejection which may lead to negative social identities (Ben-Asher, Gottlieb & Alsraiha, 2023).

Continual rejection can cause people to develop expectations that other people will also reject them. This refers to a personality trait called rejection sensitivity. These expectations can make an individual hypersensitive to possible rejection, and he/she will become reluctant to develop interpersonal relationships for fear of being hurt. Continual rejection can initiate a vicious cycle where sensitivity to rejection causes individuals to push others away to avoid potential hurt. This behavior damages relationships, leading to more rejection and heightened sensitivity. As a result, rejection can lead to social isolation and loneliness (Baumeister et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2006).

Rejection can also result in low self-esteem and interfere with normal psychological functioning. It disrupts cognitive processing and undermines self-regulation. Rejected individuals often approach new social interactions with skepticism, aloofness, avoidance, or outright hostility. This highlights the behavioral effects of rejection: such individuals tend to be less generous, cooperative, and helpful than others, and they may be more inclined to cheat or break social norms. They may also engage in short-sighted, impulsive, and self-destructive behaviours. Aggression and rejection are also linked in multiple ways (Baumeister et al., 2022; Kassin et al., 2014; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Taylor et al., 2006).

Bullying refers to an interaction in which the bully has more power than the victim. Power imbalance can be the result of physical force, social status, group size, or knowledge of the victim's susceptibility (Baumeister et al., 2022; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Victimization is related to depression, low self-reliance, and peer rejection (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017).

Mendo-Lázaro et al. (2019) illustrate a link between parental rejection and school bullying and victimisation. A lack of love and communication or strict standards at home may have a negative influence on the socio-emotional development of adolescents. Chen and George (2005) also confirm the association between family support and emotional stability in adolescence.

### ***Social isolation***

Social isolation is "the inadequate quality and quantity of social relationships with other people" (Zavaleta et al., 2017, p. 3). Both quantity and quality are important indicators of social isolation. While quantity refers to the number of relationships, quality focuses on the value and satisfaction received from a relationship (Samuel et al., 2018). External social isolation refers to the total number of relationships an individual has, while internal social isolation is related to the thoughts and feelings that accompany the relationship (Samuel et al., 2018). The absence of peer relationships and social interactions can negatively impact interpersonal social identity. Students who are excluded from collaborating networks will end up feeling socially excluded (Ali & Smith, 2015). Priego and Peralta (2013) confirm that the absence of social connection is a leading factor in social isolation.

A feeling of social isolation begins unconsciously but is displayed in different manners, for example, dropping out of courses (House, 2001). An earlier inability to form social relationships, the circumstances of individuals, technological progress, and changes in the social structure of society (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003) can all contribute to social isolation. Gazelle and Rubin (2019) link social isolation with internal challenges such as loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Social isolation has a negative effect on both individuals and groups. The well-being, overall function, and quality of life of individuals are negatively impacted, while groups show an absence of communality and social cohesion (Hortulanus et al., 2006).

Institutional isolation is linked to subordinate or out-groups not being included or accepted in social networks (Ali & Smith, 2015). Institutional isolation can be described as a lack of knowledge, access to and "interaction with organizational sources of power, prestige, support, and information critical to one's success." Without acceptance from the dominant group, the risk of social isolation will increase (Ali & Smith, 2015).

Cacioppo and Hawkley (2013) explain that the vicious cycle of being a social outcast in one's own mind is closely linked to loneliness. Individuals who feel lonely are more likely to experience social anxiety and have negative expectations about how others will treat them. They often perceive stressors as threats rather than challenges and tend to cope in a passive, isolative manner rather than actively seeking solutions. This negative social cognition results in

self-protective and self-defeating behaviors, which only increase social isolation and loneliness (Besse et al., 2022).

Rubin, Coplan and Bowker (2009) refer to a negative feedback loop where negative experiences with peers reinforce social withdrawal. Research on the negative feedback loop illustrates how socially withdrawn children in the middle and late childhood years increasingly develop a negative self-image, low self-assurance, and feelings of rejection (Rubin et al., 2009). Therefore, students who entered the higher education context with limited social capital may struggle to form social networks, leading to social isolation and loneliness (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). According to Bourdieu (1985) the process of deliberately constructing sociability to gain the benefits of being part of a specific group, is called social capital. There are two components to social capital. Firstly, it relates to the membership of the group and social networks, and secondly, it is based on mutual cognition and recognition.

University life can be either a positive or negative experience for students. Higher education institutions have become increasingly diverse, accommodating students with different social identities. Within this diverse university space, students must negotiate and navigate their social identities (race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, and language) to experience a sense of belonging. Students with no sense of belonging describe college experience is like “stopping by the mall” to get what they need on the way to somewhere else (Jacoby & Garland, 2004, p. 65). These students might feel alienated, rejected, isolated, or lonely. Social isolation can be described as a “lack of meaningful social contacts” (Hortulanus et al., 2006, p. 40). In a university context, meaningful social contact implies relationships with fellow students (Ali & Smith, 2015).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The article draws on Erikson’s psychosocial theory (1964; 1968), and Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory (2004) to explore one student’s experiences of rejection and social isolation.

### ***Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory (1964; 1968)***

Erikson’s psychosocial theory can be used as a lens for identity construction and an understanding of *who* individuals are (Sokol, 2009). Events in early childhood can leave a permanent stamp on the character of an adult. Erikson’s theory of personality development (1964; 1968) divides life into eight stages. Each stage has its own social and emotional conflict; a psychosocial crisis. Each crisis entails a struggle between two opposing tendencies that are experienced by an individual at a specific stage. For the purpose of this paper, we focus only on stages four to six:

### ***Stage 4: Industry versus inferiority (5-12 years)***

From age six to puberty, children face the challenge of expanding their social skills beyond the family to their broader community, including their neighborhood and school. A child who can navigate this less nurturing social environment, where productivity is highly valued, is likely to develop a sense of competence. During this stage, children need consolation and approval to

boost their confidence and performance. The ability to interact in the social world is dependent on the family, the community, and the school context (De Witt, 2016; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022; Kalat, 2021; Weiten & Hassim, 2022).

***Stage 5: Identity versus confusion (adolescence, 13-19 years)***

During adolescence, children develop a sense of who they are and become independent. According to Erikson, this stage is a critical period during identity construction. Adolescents develop the skill of asking questions through self-reflection, by integrating the past, present, and future. Furthermore, people try to overcome insecurity by being more self-conscious about their strong and weak attributes. Adolescents reflect on their values, ideals, careers, and sexual identity. This is also a period when individuals navigate and negotiate to find their place in the social world. Adolescents seek intimate relationships to build, continue, and grow with people with whom they feel safe (De Witt, 2016; Weiten & Hassim, 2022).

***Stage 6: Intimacy versus isolation (early adulthood, up to 40 years)***

In early adulthood, the primary focus is on developing the ability to share intimacy with others. Successfully navigating this stage should lead to increased empathy and openness, rather than fostering shrewdness and manipulateness. This is about showing who you really are to someone, without the anxiety of giving portions of your identity away. If individuals have a strong sense of who they are, they will be able to share their sense of being with others. An individual with a weak sense of identity will struggle to define themselves in a relationship (De Witt, 2016; Weiten & Hassim, 2022).

***Social Identity Theory (1979)***

Social identity is an individual's definition of *who* he/she is, based on personal characteristics and characteristics shared with others. Social identity refers to the part of an individual's self-concept that is shaped by their membership in a social group. It includes many unique characteristics, such as name and self-concept, as well as many other characteristics that individuals may share with other people, for example, gender, interpersonal relationships, vocations or avocations, political or ideological affiliations, specific attributes, and ethnicity or religious affiliation all play a role in shaping our social identity (Jenkins, 2008; Korostelina, 2015; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Taylor et al., 2006; Weiten & Hassim, 2022).

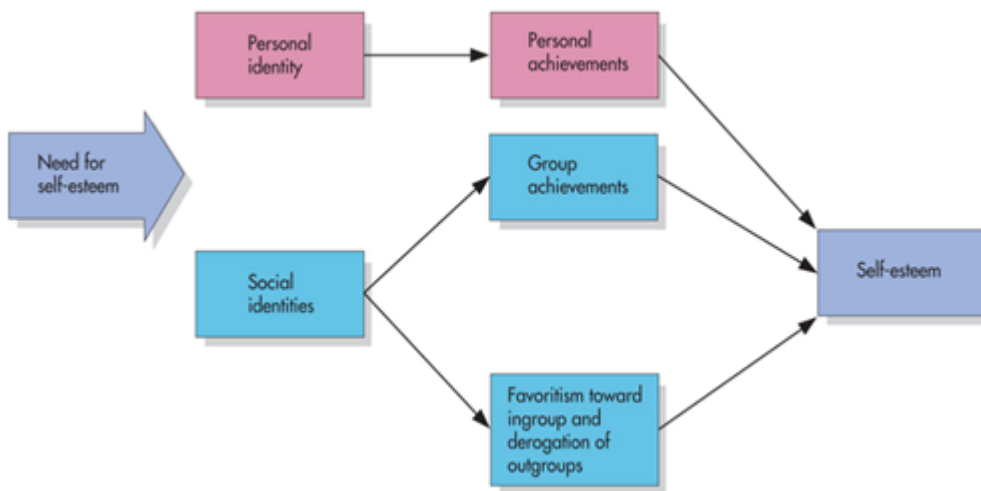
Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) is based on three key assumptions: (a) people categorize the social world into in-groups and out-groups; (b) people derive self-esteem from their social identity as members of an in-group; and (c) people's self-concepts are influenced by how they evaluate their in-group compared to other groups. The development of identification with a group involves three components: cognitive, evaluative, and emotional. The cognitive dimension of social identity refers to an individual's awareness of their group membership and involves the process of self-categorisation. The self-categorisation processes an individual applies to identify groups might result in multiple group memberships and social identities. The nature of an individual's group membership, assigned or self-selected, influences the behaviour of an individual in the group. Social categorisation is the time when the

individual's sense of others is based on the perceptions of the group. It is a reflective judgment during which the individual is referred to in terms of his or her own reference framework. Individuals are bound together by a sense of belonging to the social category.

The evaluative component of social identity reflects the value attached to group membership and influences the self-esteem of the group. According to this theory, individuals seek to enhance their self-esteem by identifying with specific social groups. In-group favoritism is a pattern of discrimination where individuals show preference for their in-groups over out-groups (Kassin et al., 2014; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Taylor et al., 2006; Weiten & Hassim, 2022). Everyone aims to boost their self-esteem, which consists of two components: (1) personal identity and (2) various collective or social identities based on group affiliations. Individuals can enhance their self-esteem through personal achievements or by associating with successful groups. Social identity theory predicts two main outcomes: (1) threats to self-esteem increase the need for in-group favoritism, and (2) expressing in-group favoritism boosts self-esteem. People are likely to have higher self-esteem if they belong to a superior in-group and lower self-esteem if their in-group is perceived as inferior. A positive social identity fulfills essential needs for certainty, self-esteem, and meaning (Jaspal & Sitaridou, 2013; Kassin et al., 2014; Korostelina, 2015; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Taylor et al., 2006; Whitbourne et al., 2002).

The emotional component involves the individual's emotional investment in this identification (Muldoon et al., 2019; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Social identification is the process during which the individual identifies openly with the in-group. Social identification affects the outcomes of group formation, including intra-group cohesion, cooperation, positive evaluation, loyalty, and pride (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The meanings and evaluations which are linked to a group are comparable. Who we are, are partly described by who we are not.

Social identification has significant implications for an individual's psychological and physical health. Muldoon et al. (2019) discuss social identity resources, which are psychological and social benefits that arise from being a member of and identifying with social groups. Feeling connected to a specific group provides access to these resources, which protect and enhance well-being. Social identity resources include a sense of belonging, perceived effectiveness, support, trust, and solidarity (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

**Figure 1.***Social Identity Theory (Kassin et al., 2014)*

## METHOD

In line with the assumption that reality can only be comprehended by taking multiple constructions of meaning and knowledge into account, we followed a qualitative approach (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). By listening to a student's stories on a diverse university campus, we tried to make sense of his experiences of exclusion and disengagement. The narrative methodology which we used acknowledges the multilayered stories of individuals over time and in different contexts (Clandinin, 2018) as "people shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories" (Connely & Clandinin, 2012, p. 477).

### Participant and research context

The article is derived as part of a longitudinal study tracing the construction of the narrative identity of eight students at a diverse university campus over four years. For this article, we focus on the lived experiences of a white male Afrikaans-speaking student to explore how he navigated and negotiated his narrative identity over four years at university. We agree with Burmeister and Aitken (2012) that the focus in qualitative studies should be on the rich descriptions and in-depth narratives of students and not the number of participants. For John (pseudonym), the experience of a sense of belonging is a life journey/struggle. While John was still at school, he was excluded, bullied, and marginalized because of his homosexuality. In the context of higher education, John had to navigate the subordinate position of his language and racial category. Amongst the dominant black Setswana-speaking students, John found it difficult to experience a sense of belonging. The paper explores how the subordinate social categories of one student, over a lifelong period, contributed to a negative social identity, and experiences of social isolation and disengagement.



### **Data Generation and Analysis**

The data for this study were generated over four years through reflections and semi-structured interviews. Written reflections were completed at home, focussing on specific prompts. Through introspection, the participant relived his experiences and became an author of his own story (Park, 2013). The reflections were used as a background and a point of departure before each interview took place. Face-to-face interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted on campus at an agreed time and place. The interviews allowed us to dig deeper into the participant's experiences of exclusion and disengagement. With the permission of the participant, a recording of each interview was made, whereafter we transcribed the raw data. Reflections and interviews during the first year of study focused on the participant's home, school, and community experiences while data generated during the second, third and fourth years of study of the participant focused on his experiences on campus.

We made use of an inductive thematic analysis to identify themes in the transcriptions and reflections which depict "some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set[s]" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 82). We linked different episodes of exclusion and disengagement and made use of verbatim quotations to make the participant the narrator of his own story (McGarrigle, 2018). The theoretical lenses of Erikson (1950; 1964; 1968) framed the lived experiences of the participant.

We agree with Bold (2012, p. 144) who believes that validity in narrative research lies in the lived experiences, where the focus lies "in the comparisons that readers make with the lived story that they know." To increase the reliability of the study, we allowed the participant to check the correctness of the transcriptions. We applied for and were granted ethical clearance to complete this study. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study to protect the participant's identity.

### **Narratives of living on the margins**

#### ***John's childhood experiences***

John's father played the dominant role in their household. If the family would dine out, John's father would decide what everyone should have for dinner. His father also *managed the finances and set the rules for the children*. Regarding gender, John's family acknowledged the male as the dominant, superior figure; one that leads a household. Knowledge is important for his father, and he put pressure on John and his older brother to perform well. His brother's excellent results motivated him even further to perform well. His father would fight with him if he didn't *perform to his standards*. During the industry versus inferiority stage, children need approval from their parents to boost their confidence (Erikson, 1964; 1968). There were also times during which John's father had to work away from home, and that contributed to John's experience of a distant father. John's older brother was his role model. He had many friends, performed well in sports and academics, and was a top learner in his class and head boy of the school. His brother also received *more power from his parents* – he could go out and do certain things when John had to stay at home.

It was difficult for John *to make friends with boys* and he, therefore, chose to *be friends with girls*. John had one best female friend who would do anything to protect him. John had no peer groups either. John was not interested in any sports activities at school and neither did he play with boy toys. The boys viewed him as *other* and started to bully him. John always knew that he was gay. In his Grade 4 year, he realised his *attraction to older boys* and how beautiful they were to him. From an early age, John was aware of his *otherness* regarding his gender. As a member of an out-group, John's self-esteem was negatively affected (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). He started to ignore his attraction towards boys by focusing more on his academics. He tried to keep his *secret quiet* by working very hard and staying under the radar. During breaks, John mostly sat alone. He never felt that he belonged anywhere, and he felt as if people were looking down on him. The ostracism (being alone, rejected and excluded) that John experienced, is the opposite of our human nature to be included in social groups (Baumeister, 2022).

John was bullied in primary school because of his *otherness*. He was flamboyant and used his hands when he *talked and explained things*. His *voice was also high at times* and the boys would ridicule him about it. John's brother told his parents about the bullying, and they started to help John to be more socially acceptable – not using his hands in a conversation and to focus on his voice. This aligns with the view of Chen and George (2005), who believe that a negative family climate at home may contribute to the emotional instability of adolescents. John's parents restricted his otherness and did not praise him for who he was. This contributed to his sense of inferiority and low self-esteem (Erikson, 1950; 1964; 1968). John's female friend was a tomboy, and she could express herself easily. She was the one who protected John and took his side. With no strong social network, John lost his joy for life (Baumeister, 2018). He felt lonely and rejected.

It was difficult for John to adjust to new settings. During his school years, John was *very nervous* and worried easily about things. John was not victimised as much in high school as in primary school. However, he was marginalised and excluded, and also viewed as *other* in high school. John recalls how he was excluded and marginalized because he *didn't fit into the normal teenage group*. During his Gr 8-year, John gained a lot of weight. This resulted in a *negative self-image*. John then started to starve himself and he ended up underweight. Not only did the learners question and tease him when he gained weight, but also when he lost a lot of weight. John realized that if he wanted to be *included in school*, he had to adapt to the school culture. To worsen matters even further, John's father lost his job during his Grade 8 year. The school kids did not know about this challenge, but they did realise that John's *family was not financially well off*. John was diagnosed with depression during his high school years. John did not perform in sports, and the pressure that he placed on himself, contributed to his depression. This aligns with the view of Kassin et al. (2014), who believe that continued ostracism over a long period may contribute to depression.

Throughout his school career, John performed very well academically but this came at a price - he placed unnecessary pressure on himself. All his classmates were used to John

obtaining good results. Whenever John's marks dropped, the boys would make nasty comments. John mostly achieved 80% to 90%. Whenever he scored 70% on a test, the boys would mock him and ask what was wrong. The stress also had a *negative effect on his skin*. John developed acne and had to wear a foundation to cover all the marks. This also led to quarrels with teachers and his parents. The problem disappeared when John was placed on medication. During his high school years, John experienced role confusion (Erikson, 1950; 1964; 1968), as he never received support to be who he was.

John's feelings towards other boys came to the fore in his Grade 10 year when he became interested in a Grade 12 boy. John told his mother about his homosexuality, and she told his father. The kids at school would ask him directly if he was gay but he never *told anyone at school about my homosexuality*. John never had a girlfriend, nor was he interested in one. This was a big secret that he *kept from his parents* until his Grade 10 year. John's parents supported his homosexuality from the beginning. During one of the Life Orientation periods, John remembers how one of his classmates told the class that *homosexuality is wrong, and gays would go to hell*. John never felt safe enough to tell his teacher or a priest about his secret. The confusion that John experienced during adolescence about who he was, hampered his identity formation and his ability to take his place in the social world (Erikson, 1950; 1964; 1968).

### ***Social isolation in higher education***

John did not experience a sense of belonging on campus. He felt that his *whiteness is a thorn for many students*. He recalled how one black Setswana-speaking student had told her friend that she did not want to be in the same group as John, because of his whiteness. John believed that people who talk about racism associate it with white people only, while racism comes from all sides. John felt isolated in some of the classes. John's race (white) and language (Afrikaans) were both in subordinate position on campus. John observed racism from students as well as some lecturers. The comments in some of the classes made him, as a white man, feel uncomfortable, and *being blamed for the past that I had nothing to do with*. John was not participating in any activities on campus. He felt *like an outsider in class*. He also felt excluded from activities. This corresponds with Priego and Peralta (2013) who argue that an absence of social connection contributes to social isolation. For John the differences between students lay in their background, culture, and language. He believed that *if students understand each other's background, they will recognize and respect the differences amongst them*. For John, his skin colour was only an identifier of one of his social dimensions. It worried him that students with certain ideas regarding race wanted to teach in diverse classroom settings.

John recalled how students had presented a Setswana lesson, one of the subjects offered at the university. Unfortunately, some lecturers also gave *feedback in Setswana*, and this made John, who did not understand the language, excluded. One of his lecturers would speak English to two students and Setswana to the rest of the class. John felt that the use of two languages in class might cause division. One black student was Sotho-speaking. John knew that the student only understood a little bit of Setswana. However, the student did not correct the lecturer or

tell him that she was not Setswana-speaking. John also observed that many students spoke Setswana during SRC elections.

John did not experience any campus culture. John did not fit in because students would normally play Setswana songs. He did not identify with the music students were listening to. For John, *everything on campus relates to history*. Most of the activities were history centred and not a part of the diverse culture in the university. John observed that communication to students focused mainly on social justice issues, for example a history month or a women's month, while *light-hearted student issues*, received little attention. John thought that most *university events are centered around protests and fights students have with the university*. For John there were not many fun things that happened at university.

Since his first year, John *felt isolated in terms of the groups we are divided into based on your subjects*. His subject group, consisting of eleven students, were placed with the language and history group. That meant that when certain things were presented especially during the first and second year, *we are left with you in terms of content*. John felt that the mathematics and science students received preference during teaching practice. Students were told to write four narrative lesson plans, but *the example of a narrative lesson plan they received was a Natural Science lesson plan*. During the experimental classes, students also had a mathematics class and a biology lesson. One of the students complained and asked why they did not take a more general subject like English, as everyone had had English at school, *and then it's always the excuse of we must think of planning and think about the school*. John realised that Maths was an important subject, but he argued that taking learners out of school and bringing them to the university for a demonstration lesson, was more disruptive than taking an English class, *so take a subject everyone understands*. John felt he would have been more confident presenting a lesson, if he had taken a subject like Life Science, Natural Science, or Maths. But he *enjoy the school visits – I try to make my subject interesting*. John experimented with teaching strategies on his own. In his third year, students were supposed to apply teaching strategies, but John only had an opportunity to use it in his fourth year. He felt that it was unfair when *some students have the theory behind the topic behind with examples on how you present the lesson and teach the content*. John's group was not given this opportunity. This contributed to John feeling isolated and not experiencing any sense of belonging.

John felt isolated because of the subordinate position of his race and language. The negative comments about racism contributed to John's disengagement and social isolation on campus. John learned that *the only person that you can truly trust and rely on is yourself*. John learned to gain more confidence in himself and to trust that his decisions would lead to the best outcome. He learned that even though *independence is important*, sometimes it is good to take advice, but *you must make your own decisions*. Speaking about anything that happened at the university, *I am not a part of, and I do not feel that I want to be part of this*. All the negative things that John experienced made him determined to create an inclusive classroom when he started teaching. Everyone that he was friends with were *like counting the months – get it over*

*and done with, get your degree, get out.* This agrees with Jacoby and Garland (2004), who believe that students with no sense of belonging experience campus life as a pitstop to get what they need, before moving on to the next section in their life.

### **Discussion: Looking at John's story through the lens of Erik Erikson**

#### ***Stage 4: Industry versus inferiority (5-12 years)***

During stage four, the challenge of learning is to function socially beyond the family, in the child's broader community. Children need consolation and approval to boost their confidence and performance during this stage of their lives. Unfortunately, John was not allowed to play with friends from his community during this stage. As previously stated, the ability to interact in the social world is dependent on the family, the community, and the school context (De Witt, 2016; Kalat, 2021; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022; Weiten & Hassim, 2022). Unfortunately, John had many negative experiences during this stage of his life. During one of John's interviews, he focused a lot on his negative experiences during Grade 4 (age 9):

- This was the year he went to a large English school for the first time. He felt very alone during this time.
- He was made aware of the fact that he was part of the poor community and not part of the rich community.
- During this year he experienced children looking down on him and he felt rejected.
- He was bullied by schoolboys for being different, for example, for being flamboyant, for the way he spoke, his high-pitched voice, and for only having female friends.
- His brother's friends (Grade 7) were ugly towards him, and his brother did not back him.
- He was also surrounded by a lot of aggression at school; aggression between the school children and between the teachers and the children. He was afraid of the teachers.
- This was also the year that he realised he was attracted to boys, not girls.

Thus, John experienced a lot of rejection during this year. When his parents were made aware of the bullying, unfortunately they tried to help him by teaching him not to be himself. They taught him how to be more "normal", in order to fit in. Thus, again John learned that he was not enough as himself and felt inferior. When he went to an Afrikaans private school for Grade 6 and 7, he realized that most boys did not like him, and he felt rejected again.

#### ***Stage 5: Identity versus confusion (13-19 years)***

To become independent during adolescence, children need to develop a sense of who they are. It is a critical period for identity construction. Self-reflection is crucial during this stage. During this stage children try to overcome insecurity by being more self-conscious about both their strong and weak aspects. They reflect on their values, ideals, careers, and sexual identity. This is also a period when individuals navigate and negotiate to find their place in the social world. Adolescents seek intimate relationships to build, continue, and grow with people with whom they feel safe (De Witt, 2016; Maree, 2021; Weiten & Hassim, 2022). During this stage John's mother was still very strict when it came to John's interaction with his peers.

The orientation in grade 8 was very traumatizing for John. He explained how they had to run up and down and how difficult it was for him, because he was overweight at that time. High school was also difficult for him as he felt that *he doesn't fit anywhere* and *nobody wanted to be friends with me*. He also felt as though a lot of students looked down on him and again, he experienced a lot of aggression between different people because of race and language.

His dad played an important role in his life during this stage. John experienced his dad as very dominating. He respected his dad and did not want to disappoint him. Unfortunately, during this stage of his life, he experienced his dad as the *distant parent*. He put a lot of pressure on John and John's brother to achieve success academically. John did not communicate much with his dad. His dad's communication style during a conflict situation was difficult to handle for John. His dad would get very angry, and John felt that he would only preach to him.

His dad unfortunately lost his job, and the family experienced a lot of financial pressure. His dad did not work for two years, and he was very depressed. They had to live with John's grandmother for a while. His mother and grandmother did not see eye to eye, so he experienced a lot of fighting and pressure. John struggled with anxiety and worry. A girl at his school said that gay people would go to hell, and he felt rejected again.

In Grade 10, John was diagnosed with depression. He said he put too much pressure on himself. He had to work hard to try and fit in and lost a lot of weight.

He always looked up to his brother and saw him as a role model. He was very intelligent, very social, everybody liked him, and he made friends easily. He was dux student and head boy. John felt his brother received much more from his parents and that he got away with a lot of things. John's brother's friends would just ignore him. John confirmed that he was jealous of his brother.

Again, it is very clear that during stage 5 of John's life he again experienced a lot of rejection that led to social isolation. John did not feel like he had found his place in the world and did not have the opportunity to establish sound relationships. We believe that he may have developed a negative sense of self and identity during these years. If children are not allowed to display their true sense of being, they will feel confused and rejected.

It is also important to note that John and his family moved a lot during his life, which may have impacted his feelings of security.

### ***Stage 6: Intimacy versus isolation***

During early adulthood it is about showing who you really are to someone, without the anxiety of giving portions of your identity away. If individuals have a strong sense of who they are, they will be able to share their sense of being with others. An individual with a weak sense of identity will struggle to define themselves in a relationship (De Witt, 2016; Maree, 2021; Weiten & Hassim, 2022).

John did not easily make friends and he did not adjust well in new circumstances. His experience at university was also negative. He felt that if he had gone to another University, he would have adjusted more easily. According to John, he experienced rejection because of his

skin colour and his language at university. For example, he experienced that some black students did not want to work with him on group work. Again, he felt rejected and it led to social isolation in John's case. He did not participate in activities at university.

He also felt that being gay was not acceptable in his community. Thus, he rather kept it to himself to protect himself and did not show the world who he really was. He did not share the sense of being with others, which led to social isolation. John mentioned that he learned that he could only trust himself. This, unfortunately, could lead to more social isolation in his adulthood.

### CONCLUSION

The article explored the experiences of social isolation of one student during three stages of his life. We have illustrated a clear link between rejection and social isolation, as well as social identity status and social isolation. Continual rejection may lead to social isolation spread over different development stages. Furthermore, the subordinate position of social identities such as race, class, and sexuality lead to negative experiences which in turn result in social isolation. The participant in the study struggled to overcome his negative experiences over different developmental stages in his life. Between ages 5 and 13 children need acceptance from the social world for who they are. Parents and teachers should be sensitive towards children who do not fit into the acceptable norms of the social world. Towards adolescence, children should be comfortable with their own identity. From age 19 onwards, people should be able to openly share their sense of being with others. With none to limited recognition from family and peers and the inability to join in-groups, no social networks can be formed. This results in a lack of social capital which is necessary to navigate and negotiate a diverse university campus. Although the narratives shared in this study are unique and in a specific context, it should remind us that continuous rejection may lead to social isolation and a life on the margins.

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