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**Title of book:** Agency and Social Transformation in South African Higher Education

Author, date: Idahosa, Grace Ese-osa 2020

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Universities and higher education (HE) are commonly enmeshed in discussions of social transformation, whether in terms of the social mobility that is associated with degree-level education, the role of academic research in shaping policy, or the urgent need for social transformation within higher education institutions (HEIs). HE's contribution to the public good is repeatedly called into question as universities come under fire as elitist mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality. In particular, public HE institutions face sustained pressure to justify their use of public funds in competition with other educational sectors and other sectors such as healthcare. *Agency and Social Transformation in South African Higher Education* is situated directly within these global debates. While the book is firmly situated in the South African context – and includes rich analysis of the HE sector's roots in South African political history – the book also has a far wider reach, engaging in meta-level conversations about the social purpose of HE. In particular, this book interrogates the role of faculty members in furthering social transformation. As such, while the book makes empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of HE studies, there is also something in *Agency and Social Transformation in South African Higher Education* for all HE faculty members who are prepared to engage in reflexivity about their practice. Indeed, it is the personal-political relevance of this book that inspired Emily (first author), an academic based in the UK to invite Nidhi (co-author), who is based in India, to collaborate on this review, to consider the salience of the book across different country contexts.

One of the major strengths of *Agency and Social Transformation in South African Higher Education* is the theorisation of structure and agency in the context of faculty members' potential contribution to social transformation. Rather than adhering to a particular theorist or theoretical position, Idahosa brings the theory and the empirical context together in dialogue. Treading carefully between the monoliths of structure and agency, Idahosa finds a nuanced position between the two that recognises the structural challenges of operating within oppressive institutional cultures, but also allows space for individuals to be motivated to act within/against these contexts. The approach set out in the book is generous, in that vulnerability and exhaustion are recognised as real – Idahosa avoids setting out an impossible ideal for faculty members. At the same time, she does not leave academics comfortably sitting in their proverbial armchairs; the book asks academics, *in spite of the structural barriers that surround your work, what can you do?* Idahosa does not develop a conceptual model (however, see Akkad and Henderson, 2021 for an interpretation of Idahosa's framework). Instead, the concepts unfold through the chapters, resulting in a cumulative picture of how academics arrive at consciousness of their role in social transformation, how reproduction of norms and traditions occurs and is contested in discursive and material processes of resistance, how academics can conceptualise their potential action – and chosen inaction – as a form of 'strategic competence'. The theorisation is laid out across in-depth narrative accounts from South African faculty members; the reader gets to know these people as the book progresses. Idahosa therefore never lets the reader stray

too far into theoretical abstraction, as the narratives keep us hooked into the applicability of the theory to the intricacies of everyday academic work within enduringly unequal institutional structures.

To illustrate the potential applicability of *Agency and Social Transformation in South African Higher Education* for comparative analysis in HE studies, we now consider the relevance of the text for Indian HE research. In India, like South Africa, the historical legacy of oppressive structures, such as the caste system (a system of birth-inherited social inequality) and patriarchy, influence contemporary social relations on HE campuses. The Constitution of India, instated in the Independence era, overturned the customary rules of the caste system and guarantees equality before the law, but students and faculty members from disadvantaged castes and marginalised ethnic groups continue to negotiate social structures made up of differentiating rules, resources and relations. HE in India has expanded considerably over the recent decades, and affirmative action policies have resulted in widening access to students from disadvantaged social groups. As a result, HE campuses have become diverse in terms of gender and socio-cultural backgrounds of the student population. However, social biases are reproduced inside campuses, shaped partly by the demographic mismatch in HE classrooms: faculty members are more often from privileged groups, while large numbers of students are from marginalised groups. The theoretical framework of structure, agency and social transformation employed in this book is useful to analyse how, in India, faculty members within the social context negotiate historical legacies of oppressive structures, take actions to overcome barriers of cultural change, and attempt to transform social relations on HE campuses.

A conducive policy environment at the macro level, as is the case in both South Africa and India, no doubt plays an important role in facilitating the possibilities of institutionalising equality and non-discrimination in HEIs. However, acceptance of policy and consistency of implementation are important responsibilities at the institutional level. Since this book focuses on the role of individuals in the transformation process, it provides critical insights into how faculty members can become a catalytic force to foster cultural transformation within institutions. However, the culture of HE institutions is determined by faculty members' attitudes, ideologies and behaviours. It is rightly argued in the book that, the 'transformation of structure of social relations requires the inclusion of the oppressed' (p. 126), and that in order for 'change to happen, the university staff must believe that such change is necessary and perceive a different state of affairs' (p. 2).

In this review, we have sought to demonstrate the potential of *Agency and Social Transformation in South African Higher Education* to both provide a basis for reflection on the part of faculty members worldwide on our role as change agents in social transformation, and the book's worth as a theoretical text for comparative HE research ranging across different country contexts.

998 words

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## Reference

Akkad, A. & Henderson, E. F. (2021) Exploring the role of HE teachers as change agents in the reconstruction of post-conflict Syria, *Teaching in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2021.1965571](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1965571)

