"Students can leave on top of the world or exhausted and drained": A multi-level analysis of students' experiences of university-community engagement

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Abstract

Community Engagement (CE) may have very positive outcomes leaving students elated and motivated or very negative outcomes that may leave them fatigued. This paper demonstrates that then university student volunteer is not necessarily the bland character who volunteers because it is a good thing, as has become a popular view. On the contrary, the engagement experience present volunteers and those involved in service-learning, with various challenges as they occupy the crucial space between the university and its collaborating communities. This paper focuses on the main findings of a PhD study based at a university in the Western Cape, South Africa. In this qualitative study, 35 students, eight staff members and seven community project representatives took part in focus groups and key informant individual interviews that gauged the psychosocial experiences related to university-community engagement. Key findings on the individual and interpersonal levels and within the university, community and societal contexts are discussed. The dynamic nature of students' CE experiences direct attention to a stronger focus on well-being and structured support throughout the engagement process.

Introduction

"Students can leave on top of the world, or exhausted and drained". These words were spoken by Penelope, one of the student project leaders that participated in a focus group with other project leaders who occupied the community engagement portfolio in their different residences. Some of the students chose the portfolio, and some "stumbled upon" this important role. The students reflected on the impact of community engagement (CE) that they have personally experienced and which they have noticed among other volunteers in their groups. Throughout the study the students reflected on the profound impacts of community engagement. As can be noted from Penelope's words, CE is not a neutral process, but may have very positive outcomes leaving students elated and motivated or very negative outcomes that may leave them fatigued or burnt out.

CE consists of various forms of activities that universities undertake in collaboration with organizations and communities (Higher Education Quality Committee [HEQC], 2006). The South African post-apartheid government requires CE activities to assist with the transformation of society. In that regard, government has marked CE as a core function of universities and other higher education institutions, together with teaching and learning, and research (Department of Education, 1997; HEQC, 2006; Lazarus, 2007). Furthermore, CE in its various forms (including service-learning, volunteerism

and research), is seen to be a vehicle through which universities can become immersed in shaping society and is a way to 'disrupt social isolation' (Lazarus et al., 2008; Tatum, cited in Naudé, 2012). The extent to which universities have been able to fulfil this mandate shows varied outcomes. This is partly due to funding from government towards CE not being on par with the other core functions, putting pressure on universities to ;

At Stellenbosch University (SU), too, where the present study is located, policies and practices have been aligned to respond to the national call towards greater social collaboration through CE programmes (SU Community Interaction Policy, 2009). Even though the university has a long history of interaction with communities, the form of engagement has been changing over time, with continual shifts away from philanthropic activities towards collaboration, reciprocity and mutual benefit through curriculum-based, co-curricular involvements (or structured volunteering) and engaged scholarship (Stellenbosch University (SU), 2016). The new Social Impact Strategic Plan, which was informed by the 2014 external evaluation of the university's CE activities, reconfirmed the university's commitment to the mandate of furthering its impact within South African society in different areas. These include the 'political, economic, ecological, as well as the sphere of civil society, including family life, culture, art, education, sport, health, public discourses, public opinion-formation, public policy-making, etc.' (SU, 2016, p. 2).

As a result of the growing global emphasis on engagement, university-community collaborative relationships have been studied widely, including the factors that support or hinder the formation and maintenance of the collaborative relationships and the benefits for the different role players involved (Carlton, Whiting, Bradford, Hyjer Dyk, & Vail, 2009; Clifford & Petrescu, 2012; Ebersöhn, Loots, Eloff, & Ferreira, 2015; Pinto, 2009; Schensul, 1999; Strier, 2011; Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, & Lewis, 2005). There have been efforts to conceptualize the collaborative relationships and to develop models that can guide practices (HEQC, 2006; Kruss, 2012; Smith-Tolken, 2010; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005).

Students, however, are typically the critical link between the university as institution and the communities it collaborates with through various projects. In that regard, various studies have gauged students' experiences of CE involvement (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Kiely, 2005; Knapp, Fisher, & Levesque-Bristol, 2010).

Service-learning, in particular, has been widely recognized for its potential to be transformative to those involved in this dynamic enterprise (Kiely, 2005; Naudé, 2012, 2015). Correspondingly, with increasing university-community interaction, researchers have developed models of engagement and service-learning with a strong emphasis on the importance of reflection (thinking about an experience with the aim of learning from it and adapting future action) as a means to connect the service with the learning (Eyler, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Petersen & Osman, 2013). The emphasis has in

the meantime shifted also to more critical forms of pedagogy and reflection to include issues of power and positionality (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Constandius, Rosochacki, & Le Roux, 2014; Petersen & Osman, 2013; Thomson et al., 2011); and beyond pedagogy as a 'counter-normative' alternative to traditional classroom-based teaching (Swords & Kiely, 2010, p. 150). In the same vein, CE, and in particular service-learning, based on the premise of 'connected knowing' (Saltmarsh, 1997, p. 81), is fundamentally a holistic affair that involves and may transform cognition and emotions, affects participants' sense of morality (Eyler & Giles as cited in Strain, 2005), and enhances their cultural competence (Amerson, 2010).

On the other hand, structured student volunteering, which is often based on philanthropic motivations, has a long history at institutions of higher learning internationally and locally. The benefits of volunteering have been studied extensively and include enhanced personal development, improved self-esteem and sense of well-being, enhanced interpersonal skills and developing graduate attributes, amongst others (Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Furthermore, Putnam (as cited in Taylor & Pancer, 2007) describes volunteering as building social capital.

More critically though, Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) argue that since student volunteering is often described as a 'win-win' situation for the different parties involved, the student volunteer may 'appear a bland and uncontroversial figure' (p. 387). Moreover, they maintain that it is unrealistic to assume that the advantages of volunteering are spontaneous and self-evident. Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) further argue that because of the strong belief in the advantages of volunteering for the university, student and community, the students are often placed in a difficult position of having to help rectify the image of the university with the particular communities. However, in reality these unnoticed representatives of the university may embody the exact tensions that they are expected to address or challenge. These tensions may include class differences, power imbalances between the university and community (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012), and in a racialized society like South Africa, also the issue of race. This conflicting situation or 'paradoxical space' as described by Rose (as cited in Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 386), may indeed present challenges for the students.

When keeping in mind that student volunteer programmes are often lead and managed by students (with some financial support and limited training from the university), the guided reflection and theoretical underpinning as with service-learning modules, are starkly absent. Even without these elements, the students involved in volunteer activities may still experience the same (potentially) transformative effects as those in service-learning programmes, based on the premise that they are engaging with other people. This context as described, therefore, places student volunteers, especially the project leaders, in a very vulnerable position. The students, therefore, provide rich insight into the nuanced experiences and even challenge the normalized notion of volunteering as 'a good thing' (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 387).

Structured reflection and supervision is often the space where students should be able to talk about their experiences – instead, the focus is often on reaching learning outcomes, looking at how many participants attended the sessions, which changes could be effected in order to improve the programme and so forth – and not necessarily on the psychological aspects like the emotional experiences.

The engagement *context* is also recognized as an important influence in the learning and transformative processes that take place through CE (Kiely, 2005; Strain, 2005; Thomson et al., 2011). In light thereof, and especially in a diverse society like South Africa with its apartheid history, a society divided along racial lines, and the pervasive poverty and socio-economic inequalities (Akanbi, 2016; Statistics South Africa, 2016), the CE context may pose various challenges for university students, staff members and community partners involved. Similarly, students that share a cultural or socio-economic background with the community participants they engage with may also contend with challenges (e.g. expected to know and take on leadership positions, or contend with feelings of feeling removed from, or coming home to their community). Therefore, any study that concerns itself with CE should be cognizant of the intersection of race, language and socio-economic differences.

Stellenbosch University's historical context in particular provides a unique background for the practice of CE, considering the university's role in informing Apartheid policies. Even though the university has made progress towards inclusion and transformation, some students and the public still perceive the university to be slow in transformation and exclusionary through its language policy that foregrounds the Afrikaans language and Afrikaner culture (Fransman, 2015). Also, the university still has a predominantly White student and staff demographic (SU, 2017).

With CE taking place in mostly Coloured and Black communities that surround the campus, it is imperative to take into account the university's racialized historical relationship as exclusionary towards these surrounding communities. Even though contemporary students at SU are introduced to a university with reformed policies and social transformation intentions, the troubled history may nevertheless underlie their engagement with surrounding communities directly or indirectly.

In addition to how students may personally benefit from the experience, they also have the potential to effect change in communities through CE (Constandius et al., 2014; Maistry & Thakrar, 2012), which highlights their critical role in CE's overall mission of working towards social change (Swords & Kiely, 2010). Yet, what needs to be kept in mind here is the social contact hypothesis which holds that regular contact between people from different groups may decrease intergroup anxiety, improve intergroup attitudes and reduce intergroup prejudice (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005; Tredoux & Finchilescu, 2010). Paradoxically, intergroup contact could under certain circumstances reduce prejudice and stereotyping amongst members from different groups; and on the other hand, intergroup contact could also act to reinforce stereotypical thinking. It is

therefore important to have guided reflection processes in place to support and guide students towards CE experiences that would be more beneficial for the students and other entities in the CE spectrum.

Theoretical perspectives

CE can be understood from various theoretical perspectives. It does not have an overarching theoretical framework, which is a valid criticism one can level at the available scholarly material on the subject (Le Grange, 2007; Smith-Tolken, 2010). Indeed, it allows for confusion about what could be considered CE and how to explain the processes related to the field. On the other hand, the lack of an overarching framework may also be positioned as an advantage, since it allows scholars in the field to look at this multi-faceted enterprise through different theoretical lenses.

I draw on different theories to interpret the data on relationship development and the transformative process that takes place during the CE process. These include Mezirow's (2000) transformation theory and Kiely's (2005) transformative learning model. I also situate this work within the field of community psychology, with its focus on the individual in context of their networks and broader structures. In that regard the individual, relational and societal aspects are seen to be interconnected (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

Mezirow emphasized the importance of context in shaping our experiences of learning. In the same way, context plays a role in relationship development between students and project participants. Context here refers to the 'biographical', 'historical' and 'cultural' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3). According to Mezirow, each individual has a set of *meaning perspectives* or ways of viewing the world that develop from childhood. These perspectives determine how we think the world is supposed to be and form the foundation to our *frames of reference*. Consequently, we use these frames of reference to filter new knowledge we obtain (Mezirow, 2000). Furthermore, he proposes that our frames of reference are in turn made up of *points of views* and *habits of mind*. When individuals encounter new information that is contrary to how they normally view the world, they experience what he called a *disorienting dilemma* which challenges current beliefs and prompt people to rethink, reconsider and adapt their views (Mezirow, 2000).

An important aspect of Mezirow's transformation theory for the current study is the notion of 'habits of mind', which is defined as 'broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting, influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes. These codes or canon may be cultural, social, linguistic, educational, economic, political, psychological, religious, and aesthetic and others' (p. 26). In turn, habits of mind find expression through forming particular 'points of view' on the issues concerned (Mezirow, 2008). More importantly for this study too, Mezirow (2008) emphasizes that positive engagement with people from different groups may trigger a re-evaluation of

one's points of view about them, but may not necessarily transform habits of mind. The implication of this for CE is that involvement in activities may on a superficial level assist with assessing and challenging stereotypical thinking amongst those involved in the process, but may not necessarily produce long-lasting transformation within the individual. This also highlights the need for reflective practice to be included in the programmes throughout.

Furthermore, since students enter diverse communities that may challenge them on different levels so that they experience a disorienting dilemma, the importance of guided and critical reflection and psychological support becomes imperative.

Kiely (2005) proposed five interconnected processes in the transformative learning framework, namely (a) contextual border crossing; (b) dissonance; (c) personalizing; (d) processing and connecting. ***Contextual border crossing*** delineates how various elements in the service-learning context inform the transformational experience of the students. These elements are *personal, structural, historical and programmatic* (Kiely, 2005; Naudé, 2015). Examples of these are personal histories, social positioning including race, class gender, disability, as well as the political history between those who engage. The programmatic element includes the design and process of service-learning and volunteer programmes. ***Dissonance***, the second dimension, refers to the discord or incongruence between the students' personal contexts and current beliefs and the new environment in which they engage (Kiely, 2005). Yalom (1985) asserts that 'dissonance creates a state of psychological discomfort and propels the individual to attempt to achieve a more consonant state' (p. 271). Kiely (2005) distinguishes between low-intensity and high-intensity dissonance, where these two have varying effects on the students during engagement. ***Personalizing*** refers to the students' emotional and visceral responses to dissonance (Kiely, 2005). Through the process of personalizing, students may experience varied emotions about the situations and challenges in the engagement environment. Lastly, ***processing and connecting*** is perceived as two intertwined processes, where processing deals with the more cognitive and rational sense-making of the experience; and connecting refers to the more affective side and connections formed with the people with whom the students engaged.

Community psychology

Community psychology, as the overall framework of this study, supports a multi-level perspective of the issues under exploration, and is a growing sub-discipline of psychology that has been applied in various contexts (Amer, El-Sayed, Fayad, & Khoury, 2015; Kalafat, 2000; Lazarus, Bulbulia, Taliep, & Naidoo, 2015; Makkawi, 2015). Various aspects of the discipline is captured in this broad definition of the field:

> *Community psychology offers a framework for working with those marginalised by the social system that leads to self-aware social change with an emphasis on value-based, participatory work and the forging of*

*alliances. It is a way of working that is pragmatic and reflexive, whilst not wedded to any particular orthodoxy of method. As such, community psychology is one alternative to the dominant individualistic psychology typically taught and practiced in the high income countries. It is **community** psychology because it emphasises a level of analysis and intervention other than the individual and their immediate interpersonal context. It is community **psychology** because it is nevertheless concerned with how people feel, think, experience, and act as they work together, resisting oppression and struggling to create a better world. (Burton, Boyle, Harris, & Kagan, 2007, p. 219)*

The amplification of the two words community and psychology captured in the latter part of the definition is important in this study since it highlights the connection between CP and CE, which the present research aims to foreground. In other words, the study includes the personal, interpersonal and broader contexts (community) and explores the experiences, cognition and emotions (psychology) of stakeholders in the CE process.

Aim

With this background in mind, this study sought to foreground the psychological aspects that informed students' experiences of CE on different levels – including the individual and interpersonal levels, and within the university, community and societal contexts.

In this presentation CE refers to service-learning and student volunteer programmes. In service-learning, students take part in academic credit-bearing activities such as social work students that are required to do practical sessions with individuals, groups and communities. Volunteer programmes on the other hand involve students on a voluntary basis and programmes are usually led by students involved in leadership structures or university residences. These programmes usually include life skills, sport and academic assistance.

Methodology

The current study was based here at Stellenbosch University, which is a previously White and predominantly Afrikaans university. This context is important to acknowledge as the students were predominantly White and middle class, and engaged with community project participants that were predominantly Black and Coloured. Language and contextual differences therefore played a role in the CE process and the specific experiences for the students involved.

The Generic Inductive Qualitative Model (GIQM), a generic form of grounded theory was followed in this study (Hood, 2007). Strategies included: purposive sampling methods where further sampling was contingent upon emerging questions; an iterative approach where data collection, memo-writing and analysis were conducted concurrently; and

constant comparative practice was adhered to during the coding phases. Instead of continuing the process towards developing a theory, the Generic Inductive Qualitative Model stops at the stage of describing rich themes that are grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006; Hood, 2007).

Seven focus groups were conducted with student project leaders (which included residence based and campus-wide projects) and students in service-learning programmes (psychology, engineering, social work). A total of 35 students participated in once off in-depth focus groups.

Further to this, eight semi-structured in-depth key informant interviews were conducted with university staff involved in CE in various roles, including administration, strategic management level and lecturers.

Lastly, seven semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives or managers of community projects who maintained long-standing collaborations with the university. These participants included two principals, two teachers, and three community project managers. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and ATLAS.ti (version 7) was used to manage and analyse the data in a systematic way (see Figure 1 for the data analysis process)
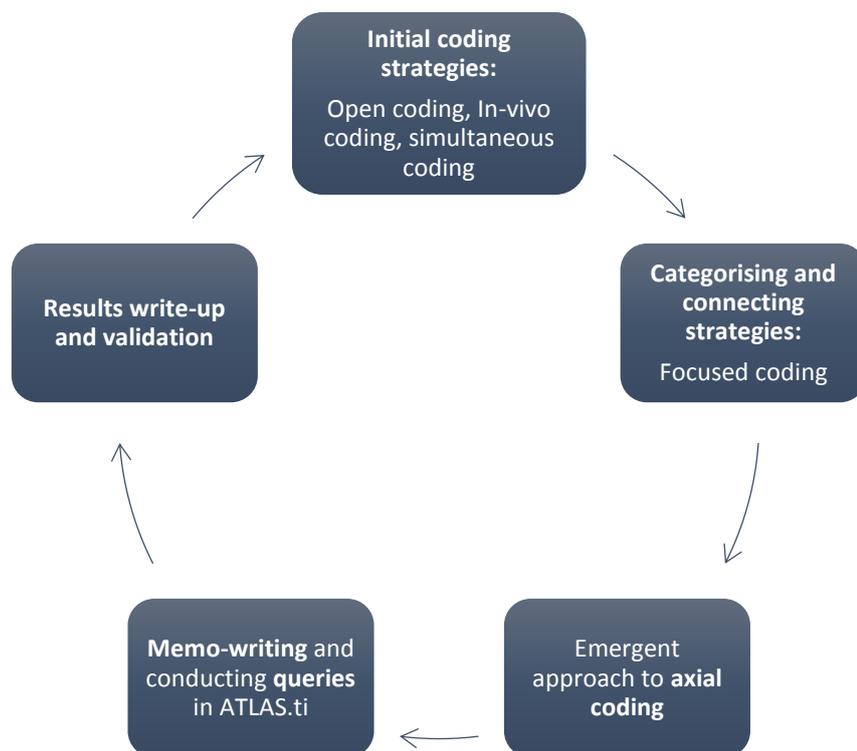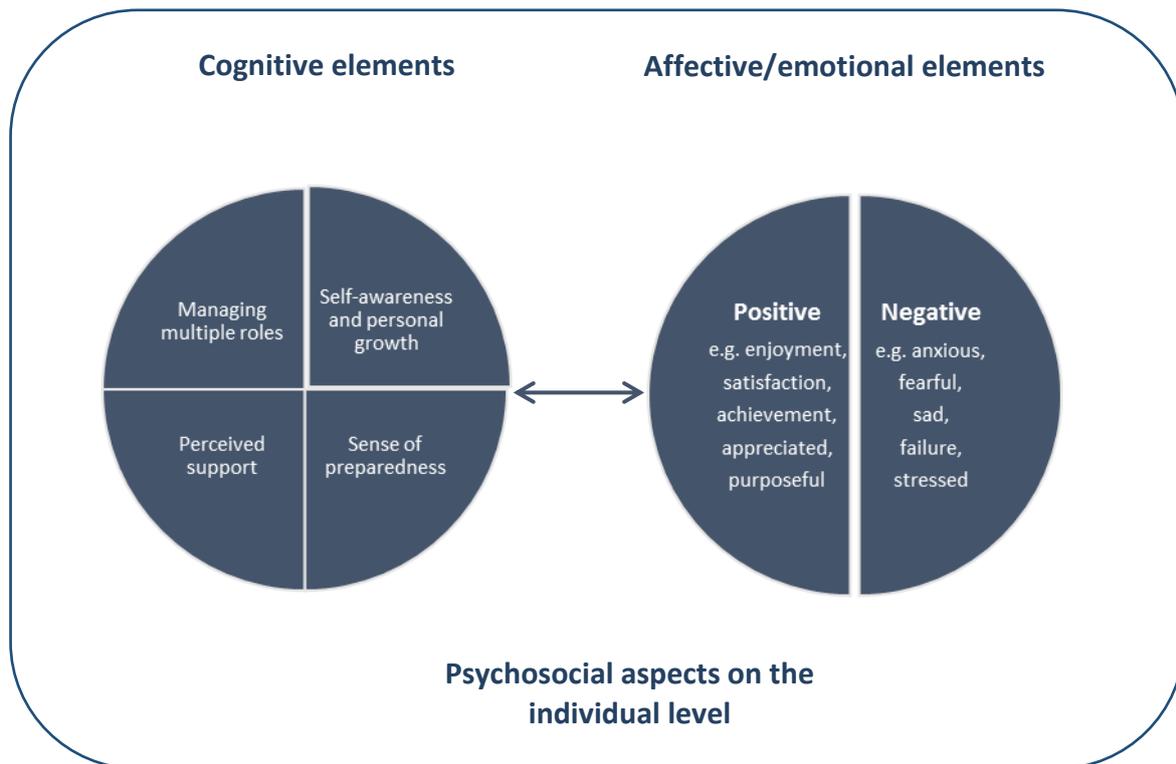

Findings

The findings of this study were presented in three separate chapters in my dissertation and reflected the vast amount of data, in the form of direct quotations that were

presented. However, for the sake of time and to give an overview of all the different levels, the findings will be presented in a very condensed way here.

Individual level:

Findings on the individual level indicate that CE is of a profoundly personal nature. As such, the participants reflected on their intensely personal investment in the programmes and on being affected by their involvement in CE cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally. These findings are in line with current literature that describes CE as involving cognitive, emotional and affective dimensions, and that the process is often transformative for participants involved. In the current study, the participants reflected on their enhanced personal growth and self-awareness, especially with regard to skills and abilities that they did not know they had.

> *And it's also a very personal issue… I am very soft-hearted and like… it's very personal, you have to do a lot of self-reflection, really, otherwise you are going to hurt yourself. And that is not nice, then you will feel like you're failing and it's a very personal (issue). (Riley, third year social work student)*

> *Personally, it made me realize so many other things, like it really takes a lot, you have to be really sensitive to take something like this on in the first place and to work with people… And I think as a leader, they [the volunteers] look at you the whole time – how does she respond, what does she do… It's really a learning process and takes of your humanity [investment of yourself]. (Coco, student project leader)*

Furthermore, being exposed to unfamiliar settings, in other words, stepping out of their comfort zones, challenged the students in various ways. In turn, this helped them to contend with the unease or dissonance experienced with having to cross contextual boundaries. In this regard students also learned critical thinking in managing novel situations in order to resolve the challenges they faced. On the other hand, the participants pointed out that engaging with dissonance should not be taken as a given, but depends on the extent to which the students engage with their newfound awareness thereof.

An important finding that speaks to a currently small body of literature is the notion of psychological preparation and preparedness for the engagement, and the link to burnout and ethics of care. Whereas current literature describes training and orientation sessions for students, in this study the students emphasized a deeper form of preparation required before engagement due to the pervasive disparate contextual differences between themselves and engagement partners.

> *It's just so awkward, one doesn't know how to handle these things, you literally threw us in blind, and that is where the psychology issue comes in again. We don't know how to handle these people; we don't have a clue. We all had a good attitude from the beginning, very nice, but what do we do when a child tells you, my mother died last night. We had a child whose uncle died two days ago. She was fine, and said he lived with us in the house. How do you speak to [a child in that situation?] (Alex, engineering student)*

Alex emphasized that his good attitude towards the engagement was not enough, since he did not know what actions to take to respond to the situation. This frustration by was not unique to Alex, many other students mentioned that they felt unprepared in terms of dealing with sensitive issues. Alex's mention of 'we don't know how to handle these people' indicated his distance from the participants in his project. His expression of distance was also not unique among the students, but it also did not deter students from engaging and trying to bridge the gap.

Additionally, the students in service-learning and volunteers emphasized a need for psychological support throughout the process. This finding was surprising in the context of service-learning modules, since reflection is usually part of the module structure. However, the students in service-learning modules, social work students in particular, mentioned that the focus of their supervision sessions is on reaching learning outcomes and managing clients and projects. Concerning the volunteers, however, some of them had to contend with their experiences on their own as no regular reflection sessions were available to them. This finding is imperative in light of the transformative processes that take place during CE, since the transformation can be positive in that students contend with dissonance, become aware of their identities and role in society. On the other hand, exposure to situations of contextual differences,
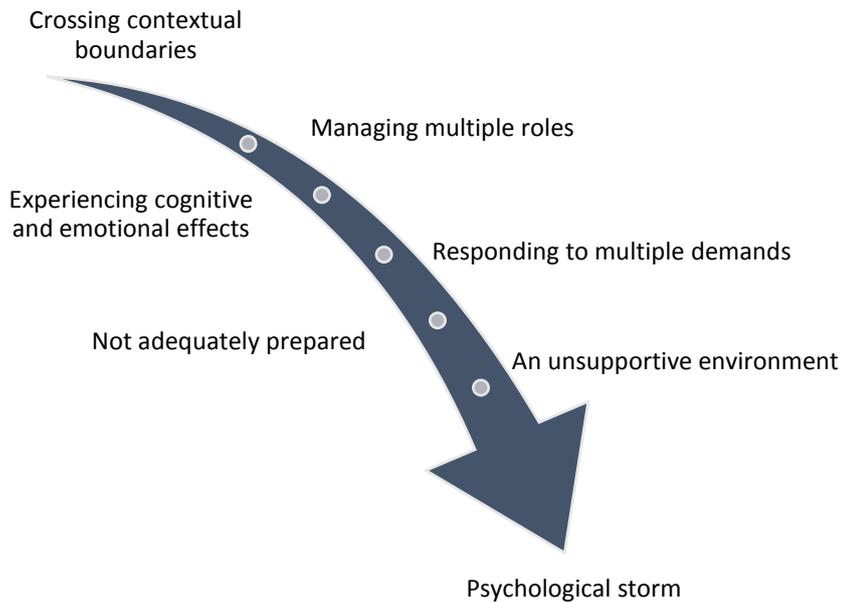
especially of a racial nature, may serve to reinforce stereotypical thinking. Creating opportunities for student debriefing and reflexivity may therefore be pivotal in attaining transformative outcomes at the individual level.

Findings on the individual level also indicate a range of emotions and visceral effects experienced by the students. Prominent emotions include sense of enjoyment; feeling appreciated; sense of achievement; satisfaction; sense of purpose; anxiety; fearfulness; sadness; sense of failure; stress and emotional exhaustion. These emotions and visceral effects were in line with current literature on the topic and confirmed the notion that CE, and specifically boundary crossing, is profoundly emotional. The students also mentioned that their engagement in the projects invoked in them such passion for the work that they wanted to continue with it after the termination of the specific project.

Examples from the current study to highlight on the negative spectrum were that of Alegra, who became depressed because of the complexities that she had to deal with, and Heidi's description of secondary traumatization through working with cases of violence and abuse, and ensuing strategy of desensitization to help her deal with it.

> *I've spent the last couple of months – I've read over, I think over 70 cases with (about) young children and women, like being abused, being sexually assaulted. If I wasn't desensitized to it, I wouldn't make it through the day, genuinely. If I had to take in every single thing that I read I wouldn't make it through the day, because those cases are hectic especially like working with rapes and that kind of thing… But somewhere I have had to learn to distance myself… I have to almost see them as a number. I have to look at the cases, look at the age once when I type into referral and then I just leave it, I just don't look at it again, because if I did… if I have to sit and like discuss the amount of children under the age of 10 or whatever, I would literally break down and cry, because it's insane. It's hectic… (Heidi, 4th year social work student)*

An innovative finding on the individual level is the phenomenon of the psychological storm.

Crossing contextual
boundaries

Managing multiple roles

Experiencing cognitive
and emotional effects

Responding to multiple demands

Not adequately prepared

An unsupportive environment

Psychological storm

This refers to the sense of being overwhelmed due to the complex challenges related to CE. The elements that may lead up to the experience of a psychological storm include crossing contextual boundaries; managing multiple roles; experiencing cognitive and emotional effects; responding to multiple demands; not being adequately prepared for the engagement; and an unsupported environment. Upon consideration of the psychological storm, the link to burnout was illuminated – a concept widely studied in psychology, education, health care and other service and care professions – but not readily in CE.

In that regard the students' well-being in the process of engagement is foregrounded, especially in light of the possible changes towards negative or positive affective experiences. The findings point to a need for greater focus on ethics of care and efforts to prevent burnout.

Interpersonal level

Language differences between the students and project participants invariably influenced the engagement experience positively or negatively. The students in this study found creative ways to deal with language divides such as asking the project participants to translate key words for the students to learn and practise at home. This activity was also perceived as beneficial for forming bonds.

> *My problem with, well any type of social work, is my language barrier. So most of my clients are Afrikaans, they can understand English, but they can't speak English at all. So, I can speak to them, but I need [name of fellow student] to translate for me. So, it's very difficult to interact with them or to give them valuable services or for it to be even of value to me, because sometimes I can't learn anything.* (Odille, third-year social work student)

Psychosocial aspects on the interpersonal level
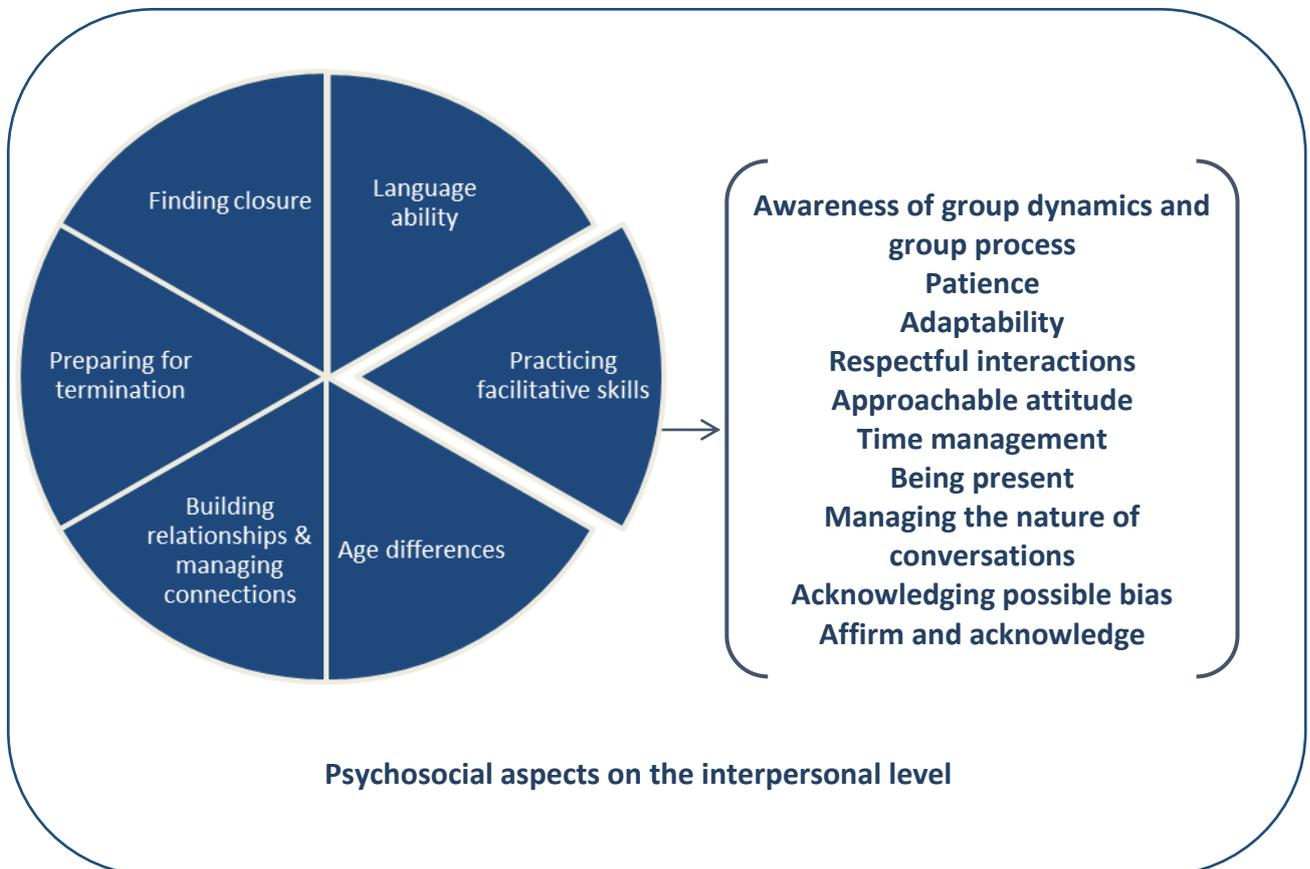
Speaking the same language as the project participants was seen by some students as a privileged position. However, being the only student or one of few who understand the project participants' language was also found to be a burden sometimes as the one with the language ability had to take on more duties and act as interlocutor to both the student group and community participant group.

A group of students contested whether the project participants should be compelled to speak English as a common language and as a language that they need to be able to become more conversant with in preparation for the context beyond school. In some cases, when given the opportunity to speak in their mother tongue, the project participants reverted to English.

Age also played a prominent role in the CE experience. First, since many projects are collaborations between the university and schools in the surrounding area, big age differences between the students and learners are common. For some students it was more challenging than for others to engage with younger learners. Age also was a factor in professional activities with the social work students relating that they felt judged based on their age. As such they were considered as too young to be advising older people, which in turn influenced whether they could work with the people assigned to them. Age also influenced engagement when the students and community participants were very close in age. In that regard, the students evaluated themselves against their project participants, which consequently made way for judgemental attitudes.

The participants in this study reported acquiring similar skills as presented in current literature, such as group facilitation skills; developing patience and adaptability; respectful interactions; maintaining an approachable attitude; and time management. The findings also include other skills not commonly reported in current literature, such as: 'being present', which refers to mindfulness or being aware and deciding how to respond to a situation; managing the nature of conversations, especially with regard to sensitive topics; acknowledging possible bias; and affirming and acknowledging, which refers to giving positive feedback and recognition for someone's efforts, and to affirm him/her for persisting in the face of challenging circumstances.

Here is an example of being present:

> *We have a couple of top students and we have a couple of… struggling students. And there are a couple of them where you sort of sit and wonder, I mean, none of us study psychology, so we sit and wonder: "Is this child maybe ADD [ADHD]?" Is this going on? They have a very short attention span, so you need to take that into consideration. So why are they behaving the way they are behaving? And how am I going to approach this… So, in that sense when you're working so closely especially one-on-one, you need to be able to perceive that child very, very well in order to actually obtain the results that you were looking for.*

> *Because otherwise, you could keep going there, and keep being there, but academically you won't achieve any of the results that you were seeking for when you initially started the project.* (Penelope, student project leader)

In line with current literature, the students in this study formed bonds with a small number of project participants within big groups, and these bonds developed over time. In light of forming connections, students at times experienced uncertainty as to how much to share of themselves in the engagement relationship.

Another important component of the CE experience that emerged from this study is the 'psychological block'. This refers to learners' openness or resistance to new students in a project, following the termination of a very strong bond with a previous student. In this regard, the project participant may resist engaging with new volunteers, since it feels like being disloyal to the previous student.

And lastly, this study presents closure as a further step in the termination process. This is not addressed in the CE literature. Students' sense of closure was influenced by succession plans, their reflection on the impact that they had made, and their sense of satisfaction over their involvement in a bigger cause.

University context

Stellenbosch University, where this study was located, is well aligned with national policies on CE and has an institutional policy towards social impact. The university has an established unit with staff and financial resources dedicated to the task of CE. Training programmes in CE are available for staff and students. These aspects form important programmatic contextual elements, which in turn sets the stage for CE initiatives on the institutional level.

Due to SU's history with the surrounding communities, there may still be underlying dynamics that may influence the engagement. There should be awareness of this. Respectful engagement and collaborative approaches like power sharing and mutual decision making can assist in this regard.

Although several staff members are incorporating CE into modules and community-based research projects, there are still some members that are sceptical of the relevance of CE as part of the university's core business.

> *Our university has a historical mark of shame on it, and we have to work hard so that it can eventually be erased. The history will always be with us, but you know, we still have to work much longer and harder in order to get to a place where our community partners say, this is surely an asset for all people in the country. So I cannot see how some of my academic colleagues can think that community interaction does not*

belong here, and that they should only continue with teaching and
learning – as if the university exists in a vacuum. I think step by step we
are building people's trust. So there is still a lot of work to be done, for me
and the generations that come after me. I have no illusions; we still need
to give this university a different image through community interaction.
(Abraham, SU staff member)

Many of the engagement projects are said to be more geared towards ameliorative initiatives rather than transformative outcomes.

In line with current literature, this study emphasizes that the university's investment in CE does not come and should not come at the expense of quality teaching and learning, and research.

Another key issue pointed out by George, SU staff member, was that self-awareness extended to the staff members as well. It is not just something that the students in CE programmes had to master. Being aware of how one's race as one aspect of identity may play a role in how staff conceptualize and engage with the work related to CE. George explained that he has learned the value of self-awareness in conceptualizing the work and facilitating CE courses. He mentioned that: *'In South Africa, people's identities have been colour coded'*. These colour-coded identities often imply *'stigmas of derogatory kinds'*. He explained that: *'In order to participate meaningfully in transformative community engagement it is important that one free yourself from other people's constructed projections onto you'*. George continued to explain that there could be negative spinoffs in terms of facilitating CE if the staff member is not aware of how others may view them or what his or her *'colour-coded identity'* may represent for others. He felt that it is important to discuss this openly in lectures and reflection sessions during the CE process.

Community context

Students' observations of the communities where they mostly engaged were characterized by awareness of poverty; discrepancies between housing and public facilities in the same community; unemployment; lack of basic service provision and crime.

Issues of safety in communities are also discussed. The students' perception of crime in the communities influences their sense of safety during the engagement experience. Additionally, the findings indicate a need for more engagement and preparation regarding the safety concerns of students.

> *For me safety is a major issue. For me especially going into houses – okay for me*
> *with the language barrier often people are shouting at me in Afrikaans and I don't*
> *know what they saying and then I'm feeling very unsafe and very vulnerable. I was*
> *in the community last week and a very drunk man who was screaming and trying*

to get into my car and running around and so – like the supervisors and that they don't actually discuss safety with us a lot of the time. Like the field instructor will say maybe go in two's or phone me if there's a problem. But what if you actually stuck in a situation where it's not so easy to just to phone someone. Like the community members have told me, well the addicts that I'm having a group with; please don't bring your phone or money because we're very manipulative just come as you are. So then how do I contact someone? (Odille, third-year social work student)

Things that do make you feel safe, is there are community leaders in all the communities, so you have experience with that, and then so you get to know like the different role players in the communities and how to build your relationship with them. So when that very intoxicated person came running and causing havoc one of the community leaders put their hand in front of me and they were like Odille, I think it's time for you to leave as you can see this isn't a great time for you to be here, so in that way you are kind of creating safety. And I've gone to other people's houses and said can I run in here if need be or I've asked for the car so I can drive up so I can get in. But they (supervisors) don't tell you – they don't give you these pointers or advice they just like go do what you need to do. (Odille, third-year social work student)

Community project representatives in this study expressed appreciation for the investment of time and skills by the students in their projects or organizations, which is a noticeable shift from previous service-oriented initiatives and material contributions (handouts).

With regards to the teachers and the principal, they've received us very, very well, they really appreciate what we're doing… their teacher is the one who comes in on Saturday and opens the school for us. We use the school facilities, so, they really have been very supportive of the project and I must admit, I agree with Bart when they say, they really do appreciate the human element. They appreciate that we care, that we're taking the time to sort of get involved and help out and that sort of thing. (Penelope, student project leader)

Some also experienced challenges with clients not showing up for follow-up sessions in social work processes:

It's like they don't understand that whole process, I don't know like with my case work clients they first of all run away and then if I can find them they're like crisis management kind of – they come in when there's a crisis at home or whatever happens, and then they'll come into the organization they'll make a complaint and we'll open a file for them whatever. And then we want to follow up and do the assessment and check the family and all that kind of stuff, now they are nowhere to

be found. You must manage the crisis right there as it is and then they're gone. (Ivy, fourth-year social work student)

Participants also became aware of fault lines within the community that they have to factor into their planning. Fault lines refer to hidden politics and disputes on who may speak on behalf of the community. In that regard, it is imperative to follow collaborative approaches when initiating and implementing projects.

Lastly, some students observed a theory-practice divide as some theories that had been developed in non-South African contexts, were found mismatched in this context. Considering that one of the goals of CE is to provide students a chance to apply theories in real world contexts, students experienced difficulties in having to meet university expectations to apply theories and finding that the theory and practice did not always fit.

South African societal context

The study provides findings on the divided nature of South African society, racial prejudice and how it may inform the engagement space even on the individual and interpersonal levels.

> *So I think that psychology is extremely relevant also in how people think, the thought structures of people, the thinking along racial lines that are there. So our work cannot be on a very superficial level, we have to realize that there are feelings involved – people are angry in this country, people are scared and they don't trust each other... We are a post-conflict society and that conflict was based on race, so that conflict – the damages of that conflict – should be analysed and we need to work towards a solution.* (Abraham, SU staff member)

George raised a similar point:

> *The bottom line is transformation and in South Africa it's a societal transformation. And so it's creating the spaces where people can work out how to live differently because we had a past that separated us. That put us into silos that disconnected people from other people by essentializing the identity of race, by overplaying that dynamic within our identities. And so through engagement one needs to work, create a space where people can work out how to engage meaningfully, how to be a co-participant in facilitating transformation without a criterion like race getting in the way and acknowledging one's race doesn't mean – or not essentializing one's race doesn't mean disregarding it, it just means not essentializing it. It's there, but it's not the main thing about you, it's just a feature. (George, SU staff member)*

The study emphasizes that practising awareness helps to identify and engage with these dynamics as they arise. It also points out that students are guided in 'scrutinizing the knowledge in their blood' – a reference to Prof Jonathan Jansen's book with that title - which refers to thinking about the privileges associated with race, gender, class and other social variables and adjusting beliefs that are set along these lines. Spaces for group reflection and discussion are tools or mechanisms to help both students and staff members to engage with issues of race, identity and social positions in society, in the context of past and current inequalities.

> *And one thing we need to do here is to allow our students on a psychological level to scrutinize their knowledge in their blood and their thinking patterns. And I think whether it is service-learning or community-based research or volunteering as structured learning, there is the opportunity to not just be in interaction with other people to be reconciled to them, but also to gain self-knowledge.* (Abraham, SU staff member)

The final theme presents the idea of 'becoming unstuck through awareness'. This notion refers to a continuation of 'knowledge in the blood'. The process of becoming unstuck may be very challenging for the different role players involved as they contend with the dissonance of reconsidering and adapting deep-seated beliefs about themselves in relation to others.

> *I think one of the biggest institutional missed opportunities is that we have our students thinking that they need to engage with civil society beyond the institution in order to facilitate transformation when there's painfully – too little is being done about intra-institutional transformation, too little is being done to create spaces where fellow South Africans engage meaningfully enough to co-create South Africa and I think it's because of the way we were socialized to think. And it's because of the privileges that go with being part of a certain group that certain people are resistant. I think theoretically people understand, but doing so also requires of you to stop essentializing your man-ness or your Whiteness or your Christian-ness... or your wealth. It doesn't mean – and what is so bizarre is it doesn't mean you forgo it. Engaging meaningfully so that transformation can happen doesn't mean that now you stop being White or you stop being wealthy... It just means that you don't put that thing first... And it means that you acknowledge the privileges that go hand in hand. (George, SU staff member)*

Conclusion

This study provides a rich description of the psychosocial aspects related to the individual, interpersonal levels, and the university, community and societal contexts of CE. The findings indicate that CE is of a profoundly dynamic nature; the students, staff members and community project representatives invest considerable time and effort in their initiatives, and are affected by it in various ways – even though the students'

experiences were foregrounded in this presentation. Practising awareness of these contextual influences may assist in developing respectful relationships between the university and communities, and providing supportive learning and growing contexts for students as active citizens who are advancing the goal of CE towards the greater good of society.

We have started this talk with a quote, so I would like to end with another one of my favourites that captures the study broadly:

*'I think **community engagement is from the word go psychological** because it involves people from different walks of life engaging with each other to learn.'*

(George, university staff member)

Thank you for listening. I will now take some questions and comments that may help to strengthen my papers about this study.