

**“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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# Presentation overview

- Introduction and rationale for the study
- Aims of the study
- Research methodology
- Key findings
- Discussion and conclusion




# Introduction and rationale

- What is Community Engagement (CE)?
- CE at Stellenbosch University (SU)
- Growing global emphasis on CE:
  - Collaborative relationships
  - Models
- Students as the critical link between university and community
  - Experiences and benefits for service-learning and volunteers

# Introduction and rationale (continues)

- Volunteering not necessarily a “win-win” situation for all involved
- Reflection and supervision not always the supportive space for students
- Engagement context as important:
  - SA socio-economic inequalities
  - SU history
- The social contact hypothesis

# Theoretical perspectives

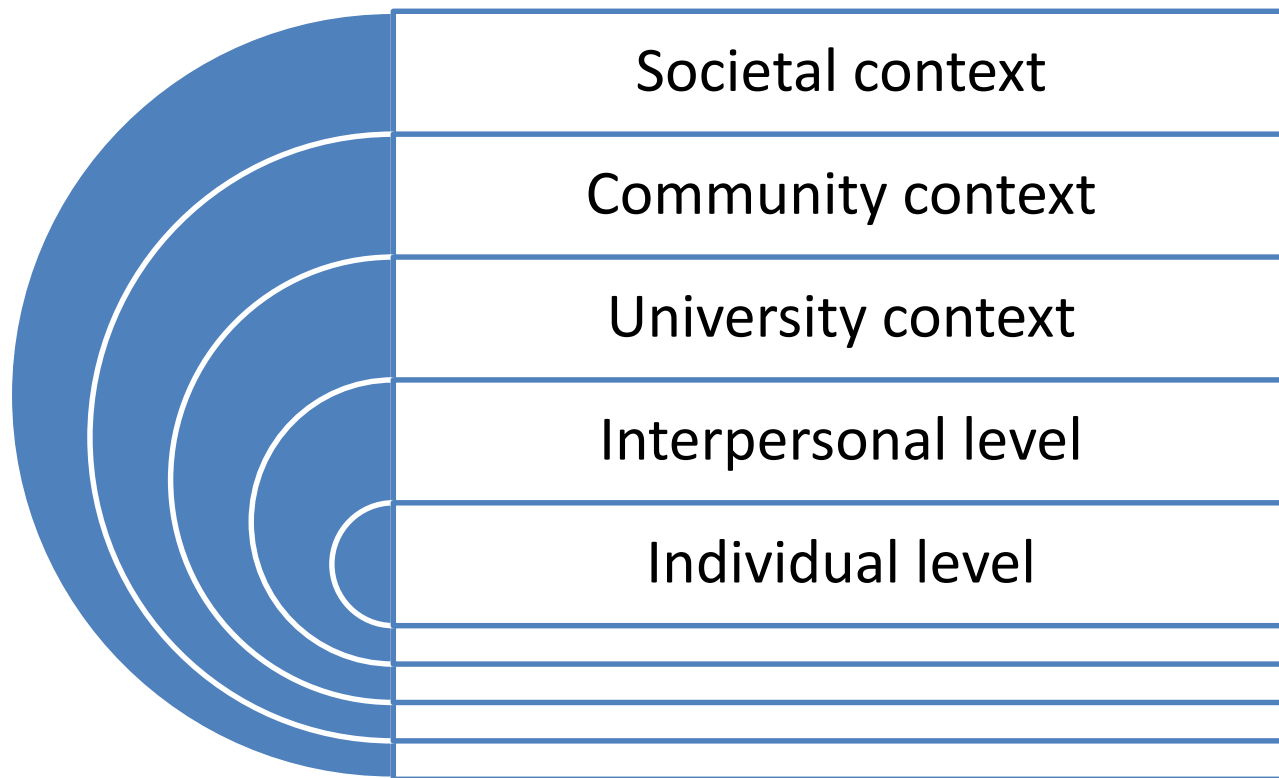
- **Mezirow's (2000; 2008) transformation theory:**
  - Context is important
  - Meaning perspectives → Foundation for frames of reference 
  - Points of views & habits of mind 
  - New knowledge contrary to current view 
  - Disorienting dilemma
- Positive engagement with culturally different people may trigger re-evaluation of points of view but not necessarily transform habits of mind

# Theoretical perspectives (continues)

- **Kiely's (2005) transformative learning framework** - 5 interconnected processes:
  - Contextual border crossing
  - Dissonance
  - Personalizing
  - Processing
  - Connecting
- **Community Psychology** as overall framework:
  - Multilevel perspective: Interrelation between the individual, relational and collective (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010)

# Aims of the study

- Overarching aim: To foreground the psychosocial aspects that inform the community engagement (CE) experiences of university students on different levels of analysis

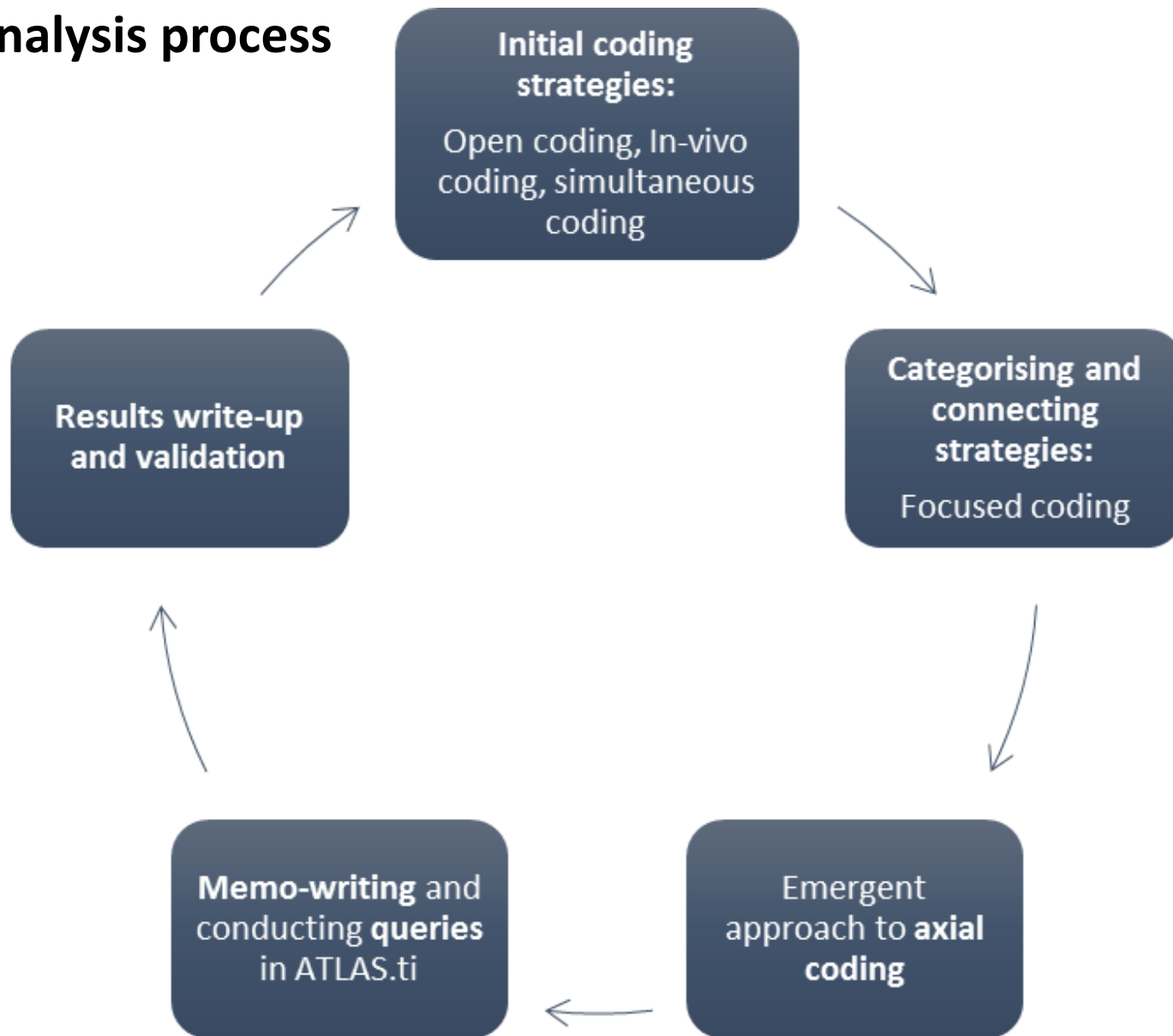


# Research methodology

- Qualitative approach
- Generic model of grounded theory (GT)
- GT strategies used:
  - Purposive sampling
  - Iterative approach
  - Constant comparative practice
  - Different phases of coding



# Data analysis process



Focus group nr	Group Description	N	Service-learning or Volunteer	Gender	Ethnicity	Home Language
1	Project leaders	4	Vol	1 M; 3 F	2 White; 2 Coloured	1 Eng; 3 Afr
2	Project leaders	4	Vol	1 M; 3 F	1 Black; 3 White	1 Xhosa; 1 Eng; 2 Afr
3	Project leaders	6	Vol	2 M; 4 F	2 Black; 3 Coloured; 1 White	2 Xhosa; 4 Afr
4	Engineering	4	SL	1 M; 3 F	4 White	2 English; 2 Afr
5	Social work (3 <sup>rd</sup> year)	6	SL	0 M; 6 F	4 Coloured; 2 White	2 English; 4 Afr
6	Social work (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	5	SL	0 M; 5 F	5 White	1 English; 4 Afr
7	Psychology students	6	SL & Vol	1 M; 5 F	2 White; 2 Black; 1 Coloured; 1 International	2 Xhosa; 2 Afr; 2 German
<b>Total</b>		35		29 Female 6 Male	19 White 10 Coloured 5 Black 1 International	21 Afrikaans 7 English 5 Xhosa 2 German

## Student participants

Participant Alias	Description	Home language	Gender	Race
Abraham	Strategic development of CE	Afrikaans	Male	Coloured
Beatrix	Strategic development of CE and lecturing in SL modules	Afrikaans	Female	White
Catarina	Coordinate student projects; train student volunteers	Afrikaans	Female	Coloured
Donna	Management in CE	English	Female	Coloured
Elsa	Strategic development of CE	English	Female	Coloured
Fabio	Lecturer and researcher in SL	Afrikaans	Male	White
George	Lecturer, volunteer programmes and SL	English	Male	Coloured
Humbert	Historian	Afrikaans	Male	White
Total		Afr = 5 Eng = 3	Female = 4 Male = 4	Coloured = 5 White = 3

### SU Staff participants

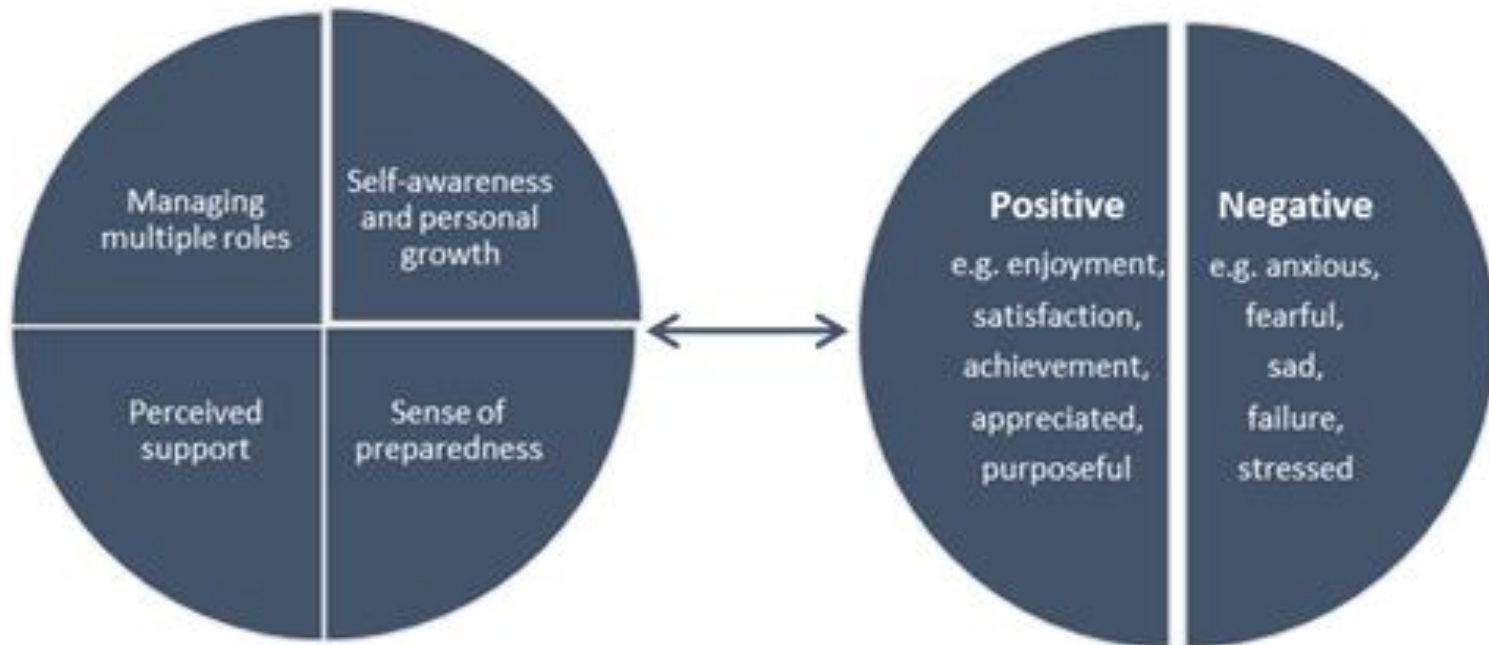
Participant Alias	Description	Home language	Gender	Race
<b>Mrs Rivers</b>	Project manager: After-school programme; programme for the elderly; crafts, etc.	Afrikaans	Female	Coloured
<b>Mr Forest</b>	Principal at primary school	Afrikaans	Male	Coloured
<b>Mr Snow</b>	Principal at primary school	Afrikaans	Male	Coloured
<b>Mrs Winterbourne</b>	High school teacher	Afrikaans	Female	White
<b>Mrs Summers</b>	Primary school teacher	Afrikaans	Female	Coloured
<b>Ms Rainbow</b>	Project manager: After-school facility	Xhosa	Female	Black
<b>Ms Sunshine</b>	Project manager: Programme for single mothers	Xhosa	Female	Black
<b>Total</b>		<b>Afrikaans = 5</b> <b>Xhosa = 2</b>	<b>Female = 5</b> <b>Male = 2</b>	<b>Coloured = 4</b> <b>Black = 2</b> <b>White = 1</b>

### Community project participants

# Individual level

Cognitive elements

Affective/emotional elements



Psychosocial aspects on the individual level

*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 being [investment of yourself].*  
(Coco, student project leader)

**Theme: Self-awareness and personal growth**

*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)*

**Theme: Psychological preparedness**

*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, 4<sup>th</sup> year social work student)*

**Theme: Negative emotions and dealing with secondary traumatization**



Crossing contextual boundaries

Managing multiple roles

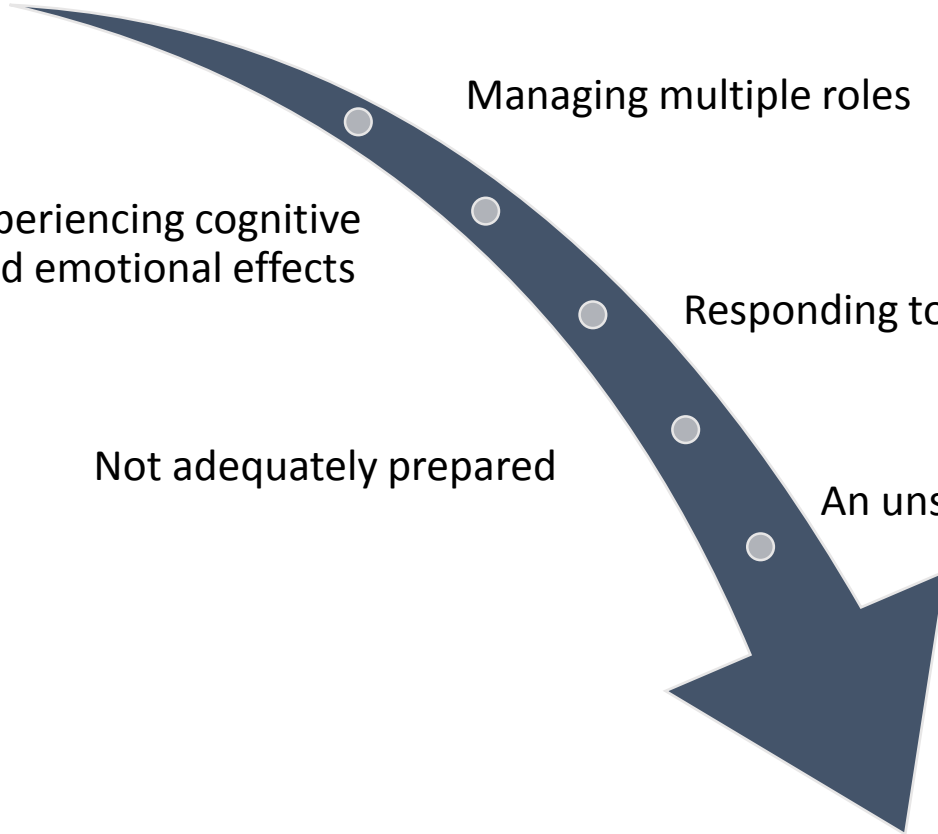
Experiencing cognitive and emotional effects

Responding to multiple demands

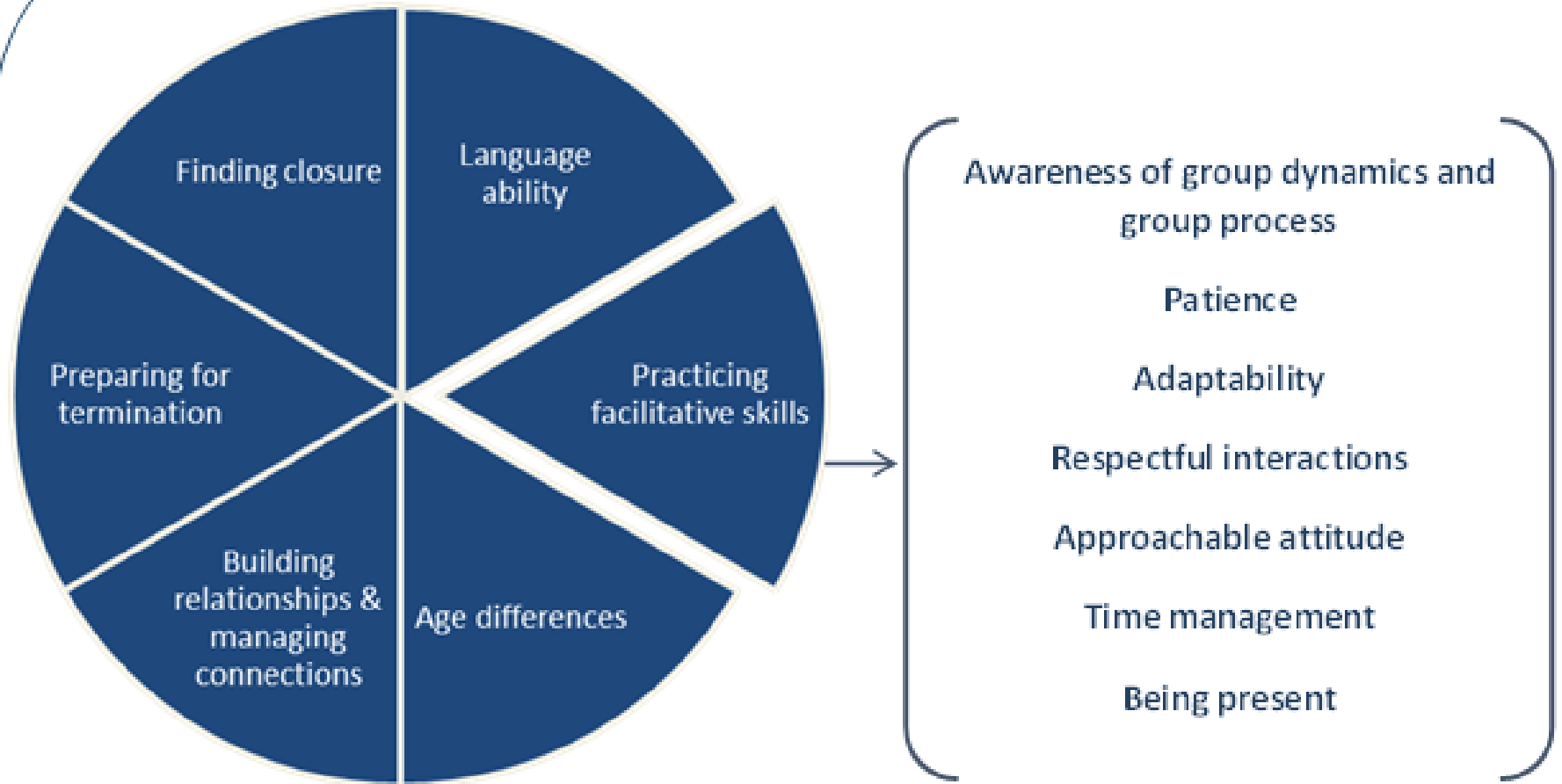
Not adequately prepared

An unsupportive environment

Psychological storm



# Interpersonal level



Psychosocial aspects on the interpersonal level

*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***

(Odille, third-year social work student)

**Theme: Language**

*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.***

*(Penelope, student project leader)*

**Theme: Being present / mindfulness**

# University context

*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)*

## Community context

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**. (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**.

(Odille, third-year social work student)

# Societal context

*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)*



*The bottom line [of CE] 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...***

*(George, SU staff member)*

# Concluding comments

- Rich description of the psychosocial aspects related to the individual, interpersonal levels, and the university, community and societal contexts of CE
- CE is of a profoundly dynamic nature – being aware and re-evaluating whether what you are doing is still relevant
- Invest considerable time and effort in their initiatives, and are affected by it in various ways
- Practising awareness of these contextual influences

*'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)*

**Fluks, LL. (2017). Psychosocial experiences related to student  
community engagement: A multilevel analysis. Unpublished doctoral  
dissertation. Stellenbosch University**

*Thank you for listening.  
Any questions or comments?*