

# Project leaders' subjective experience of the psychological benefits of community engagement

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the degree *Magister Artium* in *Research Psychology* at the  
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## SUMMARY

Community engagement has become an important component of South African universities' policy development. Universities have the duty to incorporate both the transfer of education and the promotion of community engagement amongst students. In a university environment, community engagement is the process through which students use the knowledge that they have gained from the teaching they receive and research to address the current and relevant issues experienced by communities. Although various studies have been done regarding students' community engagement, very little research within the South African context have dealt with the possible psychological benefits students may or may not gain from such endeavours. It was the broad aim of this study to contribute to filling this gap in research.

The Student Rag Community Service (SRCS) of the North-West University (NWU) was established in the late 1970's and has grown into the largest student-driven non-profit organization in South Africa today. The SRCS includes students from different academic backgrounds who are trained to become effective project leaders and volunteers in engagement. This made them the ideal target group to ascertain if students who volunteer as project leaders gained psychological benefits from their participation in community engagement activities. The specific aim of the study was to explore how the SRCS projects leaders of 2015/2016 experienced their involvement in a leadership position of community engagement activities and if they gained psychological benefits/rewards through this process. From the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), possible motivations for students' sustained participations in community engagement were further explored. Since there is limited knowledge on this phenomenon, an in-depth qualitative study was conducted involving four students from the North-West University who were project leaders in the SRCS committee. The data was obtained by means of semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the project leaders' experience. The data was analysed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. Findings revealed that the participants' initial perceptions of what the project leader position entailed were

somewhat underestimated, and they experienced various challenges on both intra- and interpersonal levels. Internal and external motivational factors assisted participants in coping with the demands of the position, making room for psychological gains of increased competence, relatedness and autonomy, as well as psychological strengths, resilience and perseverance. This study therefore highlights the importance of the motivational and psychological needs for student community engagement and volunteering as project leaders. Findings could inform the development of future programmes aimed at promoting community engagement activities amongst a student population.

The findings of the study may be used to improve the current SRCS programme with regard to students' experiences while serving on the committee. It may also be used to develop programmes directed at the promotion of community engagement activities among student volunteers and project leaders.

*Keywords:* Community engagement, community psychology, interpretative phenomenological analysis, psychological benefit, self-determination theory, students.

## OPSOMMING

Gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid het 'n baie belangrike komponent van Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite se beleid geword. Universiteite het 'n plig om beide onderrig en die bevordering van gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid in hulle werkswyse te inkorporeer. In 'n universiteitsomgewing is gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid die proses waardeur studente die kennis wat hulle uit onderrig en navorsing opgedoen het gebruik om huidige relevante kwessies in gemeenskappe aan te spreek. Alhoewel verskeie studies al onderneem is oor studente se gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid, is baie min navorsing al gedoen binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks rakende die moontlike psigologiese voordele wat studente daaruit kan kry. Die breë doelstelling van die studie was om 'n bydrae te lewer wat hierdie gaping in die navorsing kan vul.

Die Studente Jool Gemeenskapsdiens (SJGD) van die Noordwes-Universiteit (NWU) is in die laat 1970's tot stand gebring en het sedertdien gegroei tot die grootste studente-gedrewe nuwingsgewende organisasie in Suid-Afrika. Die SJGD betrek studente vanuit verskillende akademiese agtergronde en lei hulle op om effektiewe projekteleiers en vrywilligers by gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid te word. Dit het hulle die ideale teikengroep gemaak om te ondersoek of studente wat hulp aanbied as leiers enige psigologiese voordele uit hulle deelname in gemeenskapsbetrokkenheidsaktiwiteite kry. Die spesifieke doelwit van die studie was om te ondersoek hoe die SJGD-leiers van 2015/2016 hulle betrokkenheid by gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid in die leiersrol ervaar, en of hulle psigologiese voordele/belonings gekry het uit die proses. Moontlike redes vir volgehoue deelname aan gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid is verder ondersoek met behulp van die teoretiese raamwerk van die Self-beskikkingsteorie (SBT). Aangesien daar beperkte inligting oor hierdie fenomeen is, is 'n in-diepte kwalitatiewe studie gedoen onder vier studente van die NWU wat projekteleiers binne die SJGD-komitee is. Die data is ingesamel deur middel van semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude ten einde 'n in-diepte begrip te ontwikkel van die projekteleiers se ervarings. Die data is ontleed met behulp van die Interpretatiewe Fenomenologiese Analisemetode (IFA). Die bevindinge het getoon dat die deelnemers se aanvanklike persepsies van

wat die projekteier posisie sal inhou, 'n onderskatting was, en dat hulle gevolglik verskeie intra- en interpersoonlike struikelblokke ervaar het. Interne en eksterne motiverende faktore het deelnemers gehelp om die eise van die posisie te hanteer, wat ruimte geskep het vir psigologiese voordele soos vermeerderde bevoegdheid, verwantskap en outonomie, asook vir die ontwikkeling van psigologiese sterkpunte soos veerkragtigheid en deursettingsvermoë. Die studie beklemtoon dus die belangrikheid van die motiverings- en psigologiese nodigheid van gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid en vrywillige werk as projekteiers. Bevindinge kan die ontwikkeling van toekomstige programme en aktiwiteite wat gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid bevorder, ondersteun.

Die bevindinge kan gebruik word om die huidige SJGD-programme te verbeter met betrekking tot die studente se ervaring terwyl hulle op die komitee dien. Dit kan ook gebruik word om programme te ontwikkel wat gemik is op die bevordering van gemeenskapsbetrokkenheidsaktiwiteite onder studentevrywilligers en projekteiers.

*Sleutelwoorde:* Gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid, gemeenskapsielkunde, interpretatiewe fenomenologiese analise, psigologiese voordele, selfbeskikking teorie, studente.

## PREFACE

This mini-dissertation is presented in article format as described in the North-West University's (NWU) Manual for Postgraduate Studies and Rule A 5.4.2.7.

The candidate opted to write an article for submission to the **South African Journal of Psychology**, and it is presented in accordance with the American Psychological Association (APA) Publication Manual (6th edition) referencing and editorial style for both publication and examination purposes. The journal was chosen due to the research topic's agreement with the journal's aim and scope. The **South African Journal of Psychology** publishes peer-reviewed contributions in English from all fields of psychology. While the emphasis is on empirical research, the journal also accepts theoretical and methodological papers, review articles, short communications, book reviews, and letters commenting on articles published in the journal. Priority is given to articles relevant to Africa that address psychological issues of social change and development. The journal was selected for publication of the research article for this reason. The study focuses on project leaders subjective experience of community engagement through an in-depth investigation into the psychological benefits gained while serving on the SRCS committee on the Potchefstroom campus of the NWU.

Dr A. Bonthuys and Prof M. Weyers, co-authors of the article in this dissertation, have provided consent for the submission of this mini-dissertation and article for the examination purposes regarding the MA Research Psychology degree.

The mini-dissertation was sent to Turn-it-in and the report was within the norms of acceptability.

## **LETTER OF SUBMISSION**

The co-authors gave permission to the first author to submit this article for the purpose of a mini-dissertation. The first author contributed to theme development, did the major part of the literature review, contributed to the data analysis and interpretation, and did the major work for the discussion. She drafted the manuscript and incorporated all suggestions from the co-authors into the manuscript.

Dr A Bonthuys

Prof ML Weyers

## DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER

I hereby declare that this research manuscript, **Project leaders' subjective experience of the psychological benefits of community engagement**, is my own work. I also declare that all sources used have been referenced and acknowledged.

Furthermore, I declare that this mini-dissertation was edited by a qualified language editor as prescribed. Finally, I declare that this research was submitted to Turn-it-in and that a satisfactory report has been given.

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## DECLARATION BY LANGUAGE EDITOR

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## DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

I, Christina Maria Etrechia Terblanche, hereby declare that I edited the research study titled:

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for G.G. Schalkwyk for the purpose of submission as a postgraduate dissertation for examination. Changes were suggested and implementation was left to the discretion of the author.

Regards,

CME Terblanche

Cum Laude Language Practitioners (CC)

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*Table of contents*

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>SUMMERY.....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>OPSOMMING.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>PREFACE.....</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>LETTER OF SUBMISSION.....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER.....</b>	<b>VIII</b>
<b>DECLARATION BY LANGUAGE EDITOR.....</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>The theatrical background of community engagement.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Self-determination theory and motivation to volunteer.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Aim of the study.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Outline of the manuscript.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>References.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<b>CHAPTER 2: MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES AND MANUSCRIPT.....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 <i>Manuscript guidelines.....</i>	<i>11</i>
Guidelines set by: <i>The South African Journal of Psychology.....</i>	<i>11</i>
Submission of a manuscript.....	11
Manuscript structure.....	11
Short submission.....	12
Language.....	12
Ethics.....	12
2.2 <i>Manuscript.....</i>	<i>13</i>
Title of Dissertation, Authors and Contact Details.....	13
Project leaders' subjective experience pf the psychological benefits of community engagement.....	14

Abstract.....	14
The present study.....	18
Methodology.....	19
Research Design.....	19
Participants.....	19
Procedure.....	20
Data collection.....	20
Data analysis.....	21
Ethical considerations.....	22
Results.....	22
Theme 1: Perceptions of leadership.....	24
Theme 2: Challenges of a leadership position.....	25
Theme 3: Motivation for volunteering as a project leader.....	27
Theme 4: Coping with the demands of the position.....	28
Theme 5: Psychological gains obtained as a project leader.....	29
Theme 6: Psychological strengths.....	30
Discussion.....	30
Conclusion.....	35
References.....	36
<b>CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL REFLECTION.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<i>Research question and main findings of the study.....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Comparison to previous research.....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>Limitations of the study.....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>Suggestions for further research.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Autobiographical reflections.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Final word.....</i>	<i>44</i>

<i>References</i> .....	45
<b>COMPLETE REFERENCE LIST</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	<b>53</b>
Interview schedule.....	53
English version.....	53
Afrikaans version.....	54

List of Tables

**Table 1:**     *SRCS’s project leaders experience of community service*

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The theoretical background of community engagement**

According to Statistics South Africa, approximately 1.2 million South Africans volunteer in community engagement programmes each year (StatsSA, 2011). Of these volunteers the volunteer rate of students between 15-24 years of age, increased from 1.2% to 2.6% from the years 2010 to 2014 (StatsSA, 2014). These students are within secondary and tertiary education systems, which according to research, has been identified as the best populations to participate in community engagement (Bender, 2008; StatsSA, 2014).

The most frequent form of volunteering and engaging with communities amongst university students, is service learning (Bender, 2008). During service learning students apply their knowledge to address current and relevant issues within specific communities (Bender, 2008). These are usually programmes that universities have already put in place that students could easily join (Weyers & Herbst, 2014).

Service learning and community engagement have been used synonymously, though not interchangeably (Bender, 2008). Terms such as community service, community development, community-based education, and community outreach programmes have all been replaced by the term community engagement (Bender, 2008).

Since 1997, community engagement has become an important component of South African universities' policy development (Ministry of Education, 1997; Smith-Tolken, 2004). Universities have since been required to incorporate both the transference of education and instil within its students the sense of social accountability. Promoting community engagement through service learning possibly also aids in addressing the previous inequalities of apartheid (Ministry of Education, 1997; Smith-Tolken, 2004). Community engagement can take on an assortment of different forms. These include organized groups, agencies, institutions or individuals which engage in research, policy making and health promotion (Berg, Melaville & Blank, 2006).

According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), community engagement is defined as: “...*the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the wellbeing of those people*”. (CDC, 1997, p9). The CDC found community engagement to be a powerful tool for bringing health-related change within environments and behaviours of a community (CDC, 1997, p9). Knowledge creation and learning experiences are what community engagement activities sort to create (Smith-Tolken, 2004).

South African universities have come to regard community engagement as a human development activity that university staff and students perform to promote and uplift societies or individuals in need (North-West University, 2013).

Based on this understanding of community engagement, the Student Rag Community Service (SRCS) at the North-West University has grown into the largest mainly student-driven non-profit organization (NPO) in South Africa (Weyers & Herbst, 2014). The SRCS includes students from different academic backgrounds who volunteer to be trained to become effective project leaders and volunteers in non-curricular community projects, going beyond service learning and focusing more on social accountability (Weyers & Herbst, 2014).

With the continuous need for sustained community engagement, as expressed by Hyde and Knowles (2013), the question of how to prolong student participation in community engagement activities has not been adequately researched (Hyde & Knowles, 2013). Understanding the motivational and psychological factors that account for behaviour such as sustained participation and taking up the role of a project leader of a community engagement project, could provide insight into this research gap.

### **Self-determination theory and motivation to volunteer.**

SRCS project leaders volunteer to take up a leadership position in a community engagement project. Individuals are considered to be volunteers when they freely give up their time towards the goodwill of another individual, organization or group and is then said to be

partaking in volunteerism (Wilson, 2000). Volunteerism is comprised of a collection of helping behaviours which includes more commitment, and dedication of time and effort, than spontaneous help (Wilson, 2000). Kassin, Fein and Markus (2008) found that community engagement practices of volunteering and helping others are not based on possible material benefits, but rather on its psychological rewards, which contribute to enhancing the well-being of the volunteer and the community (Kassin, Fein & Markus, 2008).

According to the Self-determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan, 2009), there are specific motivational factors that contribute to well-being and fulfilment of needs. These factors can be intrinsically or extrinsically driven with the purpose of fulfilling three basic psychological needs, namely competency, relatedness and autonomy (Baumgardner & Crother, 2010; Compton 2005). Competence is based on the need to master experiences that equip one with the ability to deal effectively with the environment; relatedness is based on the need for mutually supportive interpersonal relationships; and autonomy is based on the need to make important independent decisions regarding one's life (Compton, 2005). These needs are shared by all human beings and are seen as essential for growth. Growth forms the foundation of well-being and happiness, and is seen as both a trait and a state of being (Baumgardner & Crother, 2010). When these needs are met, people show better adaptive functioning. An earlier study by Compton (2005) explained from a positive psychological perspective that the degree to which participants foster a sense of competence, contributes towards positive relationships and enhances a sense of healthy autonomy. It determines the level of flourishing they experience.

Some researchers have used SDT to examine volunteer motivation and whether positive work outcomes are related to autonomous motivation, both within the workplace and in organizational citizenship (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015). These studies discovered that autonomous motivation is supported by managerial encouragement of decision making and creativity, which leads to job satisfaction (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015; Bang & Ross, 2005; Johnson, 2014; Farrell, Johnson & Twynama, 1998; Papadakis, Griffin & Frater, 2005). Within

the majority of studies on SDT, autonomy is however, often the main focus, with competency and relatedness receiving little attention, perhaps due to the perspective that autonomy is easier for leadership to implement than the other needs (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015). Furthermore, research has found that people are more likely to participate in community engagement practices if the potential rewards of helping are relatively higher than its costs (Kassin et al., 2008). For example, when feeling “good” about helping others outweigh the risk of getting injured (physically or emotionally) during the helping process, people are more prone to participate in community engagement. This is known as the Arousal: Cost Reward Model (Kassin et al., 2008). The perception of what the community engagement activity entails, influences how individuals choose to assist someone. They have an interpretation, understanding and reaction to the request for the voluntary service, perceiving the activity as either more costly or rewarding (Grimm, Spring, & Dietz, 2007). The perception of a situation therefore influences the response and the willingness to act on a request for assistance (Grimm et al., 2007). Intrinsic perceptions and behaviours are therefore considered to be underlying needs for competence and self-determination (Boal & Cummings, 1981).

The motivation to volunteer is often subject to functional analysis as measured by the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) (Clary et al., 1998). According to this measure, each individual is moved by different and sometimes multiple functional motives to volunteer (Clary et al., 1998; Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015). These functional motives are: 1) forgetting ones problems; 2) supporting ones values; 3) gaining career advancements; 4) exercising new skills; 5) feeling good about oneself; and 6) creating new relationships (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015). Due to the criticism of the VFI’s limitations, a further open probe study analysed other forms of motivations from which factors such as enjoyment, religiousness and team building emerged as additional reasons why individuals become part of community engagement (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015). Ultimately, volunteers with altruistic and social motivations, and those with pro-civic community

engagement attitudes and humanistic values, contribute more time to volunteering in community engagement activities (O’Leary, 2014; Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015).

Community engagement can therefore be said to have a positive effect on social psychological factors such as a sense of purpose in life, and increased social interaction, which could in turn act as a buffer against stress and reduce destructive levels of self-absorption (Grimm et al., 2007; Wilson & Musick, 1999). O’Leary (2014) recently found that students benefit from community engagement by gaining an increased sensitivity towards different cultures and ethnic groups. They also have the opportunity to meet new people, enjoy new experiences and learn new skills (Environmental Protection Agency, 2001). According to a study conducted at the University of Venda, students who participated in community engagement programmes reported the psychological rewards gained from the programme as: 1) experiencing a sense of belonging by forming social groups; 2) offering learning experiences such as communication skills, team work, self-discipline and the ability to adjust to competing demands; 3) experiencing a sense of pride in their ability to do good for themselves and to do good for the communities they were involved in; 4) allowing them to redefine themselves by re-evaluating goals and perceived purpose; and 5) it gave them a feeling of “doing good” (Netshandama, Maluleka & Kutame, 2011).

International studies have shown that students who volunteer to engage in social and service learning activities had a greater capacity for socially responsible leadership, influencing their social change behaviour in a positive manner (Johnson, 2014). Social change behaviours involve an investment of time, emotional, psychological and physical resources. These behaviours are ultimately aimed at making a difference in such a way that society gains the sole benefit (Johnson, 2014).

An increased focus on civic engagement incentives and leadership development has led to a gap in the literature regarding the key contributors to students’ participation as project leaders in social change activities (Johnson, 2014). Although the motivations for social change behaviours have been documented and discussed, not enough research has been done to understand and

identify the characteristics or experiences that could predict students' involvement as project leaders in social change activities (Johnson, 2014).

Having a better understanding of why students participate in community engagement, will firstly assist educators in the construction of curricular and non-curricular activities by incorporating activities within these programmes that address the challenges of prolonged and sustainable student community engagement. Secondly, such an understanding will assist in building students' community engagement and social change capacity as per the higher education institution's mission to producing effective programmes geared towards community engagement among students (Johnson, 2014).

Although studies have been conducted on community engagement and the predictors of student participation (Bender, 2008; Johnson, 2014; Hyde & Knowles, 2013; Wilson & Musick, 1999), there is a lack of empirical evidence that supports this from a South African perspective in general, and that describes the experience of a leadership position in community engagement from a psychological perspective in particular. This makes this study most relevant and a much needed stepping-stone for more research to be conducted in this regard. It is therefore important to understand and identify psychological benefits obtained from participating in community engagement activities as student volunteers and project leaders.

### **Aim of the study.**

The aim of the study was to explore from a qualitative approach, how the SRCS projects leaders of 2015/2016 experienced their involvement in a leadership position of community engagement activities at the North-West University, and to identify psychological benefits gained from this process.

### **Outline of the Manuscript**

Section 1 provides an overview of the literature and the theoretical framework that forms the basis and background of the study. Section 2 presents the manuscript, written in article format,

addressing the aims of the study through discussion of methodology, findings and conclusions, as well as the author guidelines for submission to the South African Journal of Psychology for possible publication. Section 3 provides a critical reflection on the study and a discussion of the study's contribution.

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## CHAPTER 2

### MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES AND MANUSCRIPT

#### 2.1 Manuscript Guidelines

##### Guidelines set by: *The South African Journal of Psychology*

##### **Submission of a manuscript**

SAJP is a peer-reviewed journal publishing empirical, theoretical, and review articles on all aspects of psychology. Articles may focus on South African, African, or international issues. Manuscripts to be considered for publication should be e-mailed to [sajp@up.ac.za](mailto:sajp@up.ac.za). A covering letter with postal address, e-mail address, and telephone number should be included. The covering letter should indicate that the manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration for publication in another journal. An acknowledgement of receipt will be e-mailed to the author (within seven days, if possible) and the manuscript will be sent for review by three independent reviewers. The manuscript number must always be quoted in ALL correspondence to the editor. Only one article per author will be published per calendar year. Exceptions to this rule will be at the sole discretion of the editor (with the associate editors) in the case of an exceptional article that needs to be published, a special issue where the specific article will make a significant contribution, or a written response to a *riposte*, etc.

Where authors are invited to revise their manuscripts for re-submission, the editor must be notified (by e-mail) of the author's intention to resubmit and the revised manuscript re-submitted within six weeks. After a longer period, it will be treated as a completely new submission.

##### **Manuscript structure**

Manuscripts (including references and tables) should be no longer than 20 pages (5 000 words), and must include the full title of the manuscript, the name(s) of the author(s) and their affiliations, and the name, postal address, and e-mail address of the corresponding author. An abstract, no longer than 300 words, and an alphabetical list of at least six keywords should be

provided. The introduction to the article does not require a heading. Tables and figures, with suitable headings/captions and numbered consecutively, should follow the reference list, with their approximate positions in the text indicated. The manuscript should be an MS Word document in 12-point Times Roman font with double line spacing. The American Psychological Association (APA, ver. 6) style guidelines and referencing format should be adhered to.

### **Short submissions**

*SAJP* invites short reports on any aspect of theory and practice in psychology. We encourage manuscripts which either showcase preliminary findings of research in progress or focus on larger studies. Reports (of no more than 2 500 words) should be presented in a manner that will make the research accessible to our readership.

### **Language**

Manuscripts should be written in English. It is compulsory that manuscripts be accompanied by a declaration that the language has been properly edited, together with the name and address of the person who undertook the language editing.

### **Ethics**

Authors should take great care to spell out the steps taken to facilitate ethical clearance, i.e. how they went about complying with all the ethical issues alluded to in their study, either directly or indirectly, including informed consent and permission to report the findings. If, for example, permission was not obtained from all respondents or participants, the authors should carefully explain why this was not done.

## 2.2 Manuscript

### **Project leaders' subjective experience of the psychological benefits of community engagement**

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# **Project leaders' subjective experience of the psychological benefits of community engagement**

## **Abstract**

The aim of the study was to explore student project leaders' experience of their involvement in a leadership position and the psychological benefits gained from community engagement activities. The participants were selected from a non-probability sample of 4 students (n= 4) from the North-West University's Student Rag Community Service's (SRCS) 2015/2016 committee. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were thereafter subject to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Six main themes emerged from the data analysis: perceptions of leadership, challenges of the leadership position, motivation for volunteering as a project leader, coping with the demands of the leadership position, psychological gains of being a project leader, and psychological strengths. This study highlights the importance of the motivational and psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy for student community engagement and volunteering as project leaders. Findings could inform the development of future programmes aimed at promoting community engagement activities in a student population.

*Keywords:* Community engagement, interpretative phenomenological analysis, motivation, psychological benefit, self-determination theory, social change

## **Project leaders' subjective experience of the psychological benefits of community engagement**

Community engagement has become an intricate part of South African universities, complementing core business practices of transferring knowledge and skills with promoting and encouraging a sense of social accountability among students (Ministry of Education, 1997). According to Bender (2008), community engagement within a university environment is understood as a process where students apply their knowledge gained in the domains of teaching and research to address the current and relevant issues of their communities. In a South African context community engagement is also viewed as a human development activity that university staff and students perform to promote and uplift societies or individuals in need. It is not limited to service and work-integrated learning, or community-based research, but includes volunteering in non-curricular community projects (North-West University, 2013). Of the approximately 1.2 million South African volunteers in community engagement programmes each year, student participation have increased from 1.2% to 2.6% between 2010 and 2014 (StatsSA, 2011; StatsSA, 2014). Hyde and Knowles (2013), however, recently expressed concerns with regard to the continuous need for recruiting new volunteers for community engagement. One of the strategies used to address this need is the identification of a target population that best participates in community engagement, which according to research is college and university student populations (Hyde & Knowles, 2013).

Research found that volunteers are more motivated and prone to partake in community engagement activities and helping others in need, when they experience it as rewarding on a psychological level (Kassin, Fien, & Markus, 2008). People are also more likely to help if the potential rewards of helping are relatively higher than the costs, as indicated by the Arousal: Cost Reward Model (Kassin et al., 2008). The perception of what the community engagement activity entails therefore influences how individuals choose to assist someone. They use their

interpretation and understanding in their reaction to the request for the voluntary service (Grimm, Spring & Dietz, 2007).

Fulfilment of psychological needs are further motivations for volunteering in community engagement activities. According to the Self-determination Theory (SDT), three basic psychological needs have to be met to achieve a state of well-being, namely competency, relatedness and autonomy (Ryan, 2009). SDT is a macro-theory on human development, personality and subjective well-being that is used in the application of needs fulfilment, placing emphasis on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan, 2009). Competence entails the need to master experiences that equip one with the ability to deal effectively with their environment; relatedness is based on the need for mutually supportive interpersonal relationships; and autonomy is based on the need to make important decisions regarding one's life independently (Compton, 2005). All human beings share these needs and they are seen as essential for growth, which forms the foundation of well-being and happiness (Baugardner & Crother, 2010). SDT has five different sub-theories that each focuses on a different phenomenon (Ryan, 2009). The sub-theory named Organic Integration Theory (OIT) could provide some insight into the motivations behind project leaders joining the SRCS committee and help explore their experiences and continued participation. OIT states that if an individual's motivation is autonomous, there is an increased probability of persistence, well-being and performance of an activity (Ryan, 2009). This would suggest that when SRCS project leaders volunteer for a leadership position, in other words having the freedom of choosing to be a project leader, the possibility of them persisting and doing well, increases positively. Levels of autonomy could therefore act as a predictor to future engagement in the community (Ryan, 2009).

The measurement of volunteer motivations is often subject to functional analysis through the use of the Volunteer Functional Inventory (VFI) (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015). According to the VFI, an individual is motivated to volunteer by numerous functional motives. The functional motives identified by the VFI are: 1) forgetting ones problems; 2) supporting ones values; 3)

gaining career advancements; 4) exercising new skills; 5) feeling good about oneself; and 6) creating new relationships (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015). However, the VFI has been criticized for being too limited. Therefore, an open probe study analysed other forms of motivations, and this revealed that factors such as enjoyment, religiousness and team-building are also reasons why individuals became part of community engagement (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2015).

Apart from the initial motivation for getting involved, this study is interested in the psychological benefits gained while students are participating in community engagement activities as project leaders.

According to a study conducted at the University of Venda, students reported that the psychological benefits they gain through participating in community engagement activities are: 1) experiencing a sense of belonging by forming social groups; 2) offering learning experiences such as communication skills, team work, self-discipline and the ability to adjust to competing demands; 3) experiencing a sense of pride in their ability to do good for themselves and to do good for the communities they were involve in; 4) allowing them to redefine themselves by re-evaluating goals and perceived purpose; and 5) it gave them a feeling of “doing good” (Netshandama, Maluleka & Kutame, 2011).

Partaking in community engagement was also found to have a positive effect on social psychological components (sense of purpose in life, and increased social interaction), and social change behaviours of students (Grimm et al., 2007; Johnson, 2014; Wilson & Musick, 2013).

An increased focus on civic engagement incentives and leadership development has, however, led to a gap in the literature regarding the key contributors to students participating as project leaders in social change activities (Johnson, 2014). Although the motivations for social change behaviours have been documented and discussed, not enough research has been done to understand and identify the characteristics or experiences that could predict students’ involvement as project leaders in social change activities (Johnson, 2014).

Having a better understanding of why students participate in community engagement will firstly assist educators in the construction of curricular and non-curricular activities by incorporating activities within these programmes that address the challenges of continued and sustained student community engagement. Secondly, it will assist in building students' community engagement and social change capacity as per the higher education institutions' mission to produce effective programmes geared towards community engagement amongst students (Johnson, 2014).

### **The present study**

Although several studies have been conducted on community engagement and the predictors of student participation (Bender, 2008; Johnson, 2014; Hyde & Knowles, 2014; Wilson & Musick, 2000), there is a lack of empirical evidence that supports this from a South African perspective in general and that examines the experience of a leadership position in community engagement from a psychological perspective in particular. Attempting to address this gap in research, the aims of the study was to explore how the SRCS project leaders of 2015/2016 experienced their involvement in a leadership position of community engagement activities at the NWU, and what psychological benefits they gained through the process. The SRCS is currently the largest student-driven non-profit organization (NPO) in South Africa, which makes it ideal for addressing the aims of the current study (Weyers & Herbst, 2014). The SRCS includes students from different academic backgrounds who volunteer to be trained and become effective project leaders and volunteers in non-curricular community projects, going beyond service and work-integrated learning by focusing more on developing social accountable leaders (Weyers & Herbst, 2014).

The objectives of this study were to explore: (a) the psychological and motivational factors that led the participants to becoming project leaders, (b) the psychological benefits gained from the process of community engagement, and (c) the role of these factors and benefits in promoting future involvement of social change behaviour in community engagement beyond university.

These aims and objectives were explored through the following research questions:

- 1) What was the 2015/2016 SRCS projects leaders' experience of their involvement in a leadership position participating in community engagement activities at the NWU?
- 2) What psychological benefits did they gain from this process?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008) was used to develop an understanding of the SRCS project leaders lived experience of the leadership position and psychological benefits gained during community engagement. Within IPA the researcher tries to make sense of a participant's experience of major transitions in their lives by means of engaging with the reflections they make during their story telling of a specific phenomenon (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009). IPA is comprised of two schools of thought which includes Hermeneutics and Idiography. Hermeneutics focuses on the interpretation of the essence of a lived experience (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Though hermeneutics the researcher has the ability to gain an accurate understanding of the interpretation of a participant's thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values that support the explanation of the meaning they are trying to convey (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009; Smith, 2010). Idiography is a detailed examination of each case/participant (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). It aims to detail what the experience was like for that particular person and focuses on the sense participants are trying to make of what is happening to them (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA believes that human beings are "sense-making creatures" (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009). The participants' personal and social worlds are explored from the perspective of IPA to make sense of the meaning ascribed to the phenomenon and the experience of being a project leader in community engagement (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

### **Participants**

Participants were selected from the NWU's 2015/2016 SRCS project leaders. The SRCS committee has 79 projects each year and each project has its own leader and team of between 10

and 30 members (Weyers & Herbst, 2014). Quota sampling (Sarantakos, 2005) was employed to select participants from different categories (female hostels, male hostels and managerial cadre) for a representative sample (Breakwell, Smith, & Wright, 2012; Maree & Pietersen, 2007). Four project leaders from the managerial cadre indicated their interest and participated in the study (N=4), which according to IPA guidelines falls within the acceptable sample size of 3–6 participants (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

### **Procedure**

The participants of this study were contacted through a gatekeeper who had direct access to the project leaders on the SRCS committee on the Potchefstroom Campus. The participants were provided with an advertisement supplied by the gatekeeper outlining the objectives, expectations of the participants, risks and benefits of participating in the study. Those who wished to participate in the study were asked to provide their contact details by adding it to a contact list. Participants were recruited using a non-probability sampling method (quota sampling). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher and analysed using the IPA method.

### **Data collection method**

Semi-structured interviews (Niewenhuis, 2007) were used for data collection. This allowed the interviewer to establish rapport with the participants and the researcher had the flexibility to probe new areas that provided rich data and coverage of the phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2007). A pilot interview was conducted in order for the researcher to become familiar with conducting an interview in a second language and to identify probing questions or additional aspects of importance to the study. The interviewee of this pilot interview was not related to the study and data were not used during the analysis. A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix B) was used during the interviews, along with probing questions to meet the aims of the study. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

## **Data Analysis**

IPA data analysis is guided by a set of procedures that scholars can adapt to suit their specific goals (Smith et al., 2009). These procedures, applied on a case-by-case basis, may be summarized as a six step process, namely 1) reading and re-reading transcripts to immerse oneself in the data; 2) noting initial comments (descriptive comments, linguistic comments and conceptual comments), 3) developing emergent themes; 4) searching for connections across emergent themes; 5) moving to the next case and 6) looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). Trustworthiness was addressed by means of a purposive sampling technique (quota sampling) as it ensures that suitable data are selected from suitable participants. This sampling technique allowed the study to select a homogeneous sample relevant to the topic of the proposed research and to identify a closely defined group of participants to whom the research question will be most significant (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The accurate understanding of the participants' accounts was achieved during the interview process with the interviewer summarizing what the participants said verbally by repeating back to the participant to either confirm, clarify or gain more perspective and understanding (Shenton, 2004). During transcription the researcher made all efforts to give a true reflection of the interview by including in the transcript every pause, pronunciation difficulty, laughter and tone of voice. The researcher kept a reflective journal documenting thoughts, feelings and ideas before each interview and after each interview (Shenton, 2004).

A detailed description of the research procedures, methodology and research is provided to ensure coherence (Tracy, 2010). Where it was possible, the researcher pointed out where the findings may be applicable. This pertains to the ideas and experiences of the participants and not the preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). Neutrality was established by following a pre-determined interview schedule (Shenton, 2004). Probing questions were also within the bounds of the topic, as it was used to clarify subjective matters or phrasing (Shenton, 2004). This also ensured transparency from the researcher during the interview.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the NWU's Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-00198-15-S1). Permission to conduct the project was also obtained from the SRCS chairperson, who acted as gatekeeper between the participants and researcher. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis, with each participant giving written informed consent.

## Results

Six dominant themes relating to the project leaders' experience of a leadership position and psychological benefits gained from community engagement emerged from the IPA analysis. These were: a) perceptions of leadership, b) challenges of a leadership position, c) motivation for volunteering as a project leader, d) coping with the demands of the position, e) psychological gains obtained as project leader and f) psychological strengths. These themes, as well as their associated sub-themes, are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1** *SRCS's project leaders' experience of community engagement*

<b>Main themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<b>1. Perceptions of leadership</b>	Responsibility
	Accountability
<b>2. Challenges of a leadership position</b>	Intrapersonal challenges
	- Time management
	- Sensitive to critique
	- Feelings of incompetence

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- Lack of self-care
- 

### Interpersonal challenges

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- Relationship challenges
- 

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### **3. Motivation for volunteering as a project leader**

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#### Intrinsic motivation

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- Push own limits
  - Sense of accomplishment
  - Autonomy
- 

- Life experiences
- 

- Pay it forwards
- 

#### Extrinsic motivation

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- Acceptance
- 

- Respect
- 

- Positive influence on lives of others
- 

- Making a difference
- 

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### **Coping with demands**

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#### Coping mechanisms

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- Coping partner
- 

- Religion
- 

- Self-knowledge
-

	– Positive attitude
<b>Psychological gains obtained as project leader</b>	Self-esteem
	Problem solving
	Self confidence
	Exposure to people from different backgrounds
	Time management
<b>Psychological strengths</b>	Gratitude
	Compassion
	Resilience
	Perseverance

### **Theme 1: Perceptions of leadership**

Although participants were prepared to take up the responsibility that comes with being a project leader, their preconceived ideas about the level of responsibility and the reality were vastly different. They felt responsible to the community and the project team, while still having to ensure that the outcomes of the project are met. Participant 1 expressed the extent of this experience by stating: “you have to finish what you’ve started...because if you become involved in someone’s life you become involved in something...you can’t make false promises and you kick started the process, you need to finish it”. Another participant explained that being a leader meant “...a lot of responsibility...” (Participant 3). Participants did not initially grasp the amount of responsibility being a project leader would require. Participant 4 explains: “Joining the committee for the first

time, one is oblivious to how much work and effort you have to put in...you don't think it is really such a huge responsibility" (Participant 4). One participant related responsibility to accountability and stated: "Like I said it's important because I am not living for myself any more I am accountable to people" (Participant 1).

Perceived responsibility and accountability to community engagement projects resulted in participants sacrificing personal priorities: "Yes as a project leader you have to make a lot of sacrifices for your committee. I missed a couple of classes because we had difficult class timetables" (Participant 3). Being the leader also meant making decisions: "That's why it was nice to be a project leader. I determine the terms" (Participant 3). Participant 1 however, felt isolated in the role of project leader and ascribed the experience to language differences which resulted in avoidance from other committee members and made it difficult to follow discussions: "And joining in for community meetings were you hardly hear what they are saying", and when searching for support this participant experienced: "...I couldn't be able to get help".

## **Theme 2: Challenges of a leadership position**

The participants experienced a number of interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges related to the project leader position. The intrapersonal challenges included time management as participants had difficulty managing all the tasks for the project and academics. Participant 1 reported: "Its busyness...you have to be hands on, and you have to be always alert and a lot of schedule...so now I've learnt that I need an, pocket diary." Another participant's previous difficulty with effective time management led to further difficulties: "And I think time management was very difficult for me, because I am not good with time, yes, so it was quite an issue for me to learn it and to fit in" (Participant 2). Participant 3 also stated that "...you have to make time for SRCS, academics, your person and friends."

One participant felt excluded from the committee, and were sensitive to criticism at first: "being corrected, sometimes its harsh but take moving from there, from like not giving up so far" (Participant 1). The feeling of incompetence was also linked to interpersonal relationships within

the team: “Competence I think, I don’t like the labelling of being incompetent I don’t like being labelled uhm, ignorant you know?” (Participant 1).

Participants tended to neglect self-care practices by disregarding their own well-being at times to fulfil their duties within the committee. They often placed the community needs above their own: “I didn’t have much sleep...I get little sleep, but it is nice for me” (Participant 2).

The participants reported that due to these intrapersonal difficulties of time and energy spent as a project leader, it became challenging to balance all aspects of their lives. This caused strain on romantic relationships and friendships: “I realize it’s my fault, because she doesn’t have the things that I have to do, and I think then, I made a plan to make it right because I don’t want to lose a friend” (Participant 2). Another participant commented that the nature of the relationships within the committee was very different from what was expected: “...they, ignored me always, but they went behind my back and spoke to the chairperson and told them that no... is not doing her work. And so far I have lost so many relationships I, I was told that I was gonna build” (Participant 1). The fear of criticism and the rejection of one participant’s romantic relationship were reported as another interpersonal challenge: “I started a relationship last year, so it also had an impact, last year I was in a stable relationship...we had to do a lot of social events as a project leader, I feel as though if they knew ...it would have influenced the success I would have” (Participant 3).

Participants reportedly experienced a lack of support from the committee in terms of resources and members not supporting their project or the social events that they organized: “...not everyone has time to attend each and every event, community service event you have going on. So ja, it’s been a bit difficult to get that whole support from the committee, transport and all that. It’s been difficult” (Participant 4). They also experienced a lack of assistance when they needed clarification on an issue or physical assistance on a project, as Participant 1 stated: “...so when you have to write something and ask for extra help, people tend to be a bit, they don’t consider you at all.”, Participant 3 added: “I have a very big issue with committee hands that couldn’t come

and help, and there is a lot of external politics involved. The former project leaders make many empty promises”.

### **Theme 3: Motivation for volunteering as a project leader**

Participants shared their reasons for joining and continuing on the committee as project leaders. It became clear that there were internal and external motivational factors that encouraged volunteering as a project leader. Participant 1 had an internal drive to move beyond the known comfort zones and wanted to push his/her own limits: “...came to varsity I told myself that I’m gonna do something that I’ve never done. And here meant joining the SRC saw that I was more, I loved attending community projects and stuff and that is why I felt like this is something that I’ve never done and I wanna do it” (Participant 1). Experiencing a sense of accomplishment when success has been achieved in the face of adversity and judgement, motivated participants to excel in the role of project leader: “I was able to take the name of our committee to new heights because in the past there has been stuff that have been happening especially SRCS has not been doing so well. So...I think in the mist of everything people not believing in me I was able to say, you know what, I can offer something on the table” (Participant 1). Being able to work autonomously further encouraged participants to not just be a member of a project, but the leader, as Participant 2 explained: “...to make my own decisions, I make a bigger difference because I can choose what I want to do with my own project and the environment and so on.” Participant 4’s lived experience of receiving support through community engagement initiatives in the past, strongly motivated the need to pay it forward. He/she explained this as follows: “It’s been a part of me since I lived in an orphanage for 5 years...It’s growing within me, and it feels good to know that you’re giving back to the community, since that’s where I came out of... But I feel people who invested their time, money and effort in me, I also felt, it is also my time to invest in other people’s lives, money.” Giving back to the community out of obligation and religious beliefs also encouraged participants to become project leaders: “...understand, it’s my duty to help... and I thought I don’t want to waste my gifts...” Lastly, participants felt that this was an opportunity for them to not only be a

student attending classes, but to gain life experience: “I believe that there is more to life than just being a student...I wanted to have my diary build up out of experience...I wanna learn something from varsity not only theory... So I wanted to take whatever that I’ve learnt in.” (Participant 1)

External motivational factors included participants’ experience of acceptance and respect from the community and the perception that they can have positive influence. One participant elaborated on the experience of being respected, trusted and accepted by the community: “Learning to smile after everything, you know and achieving those things where I would also look at them and be like in the first, I can’t achieve but hearing people from the community calling me back and saying joh you know this has been great working with you and stepping into somebody’s pre-school and seeing them smile and hugging you saying okay we wanna work with you. So I feel like gaining people’s trust in matters so big like pre-school and dealing with little kids” (Participant 1). The participant continued and added: “...elderly respect from people who are older than me that believe that I can do this with them.” (Participant 1). Participant 2 shared: “I’ve changed somebody’s life while I was a student, for me. That is what I was aiming to do...I think it’s the most important to me to impact someone else’s life.” Participant 3 had a similar external motivation source: “...you can make a difference, why not make it? So it makes a better person of you, it makes you very thankful” (Participant 3).

#### **Theme 4: Coping with the demands of the position**

The participants relied on various coping mechanisms during their term as project leaders. Religion played a significant role. Participant 1 elaborated on this: “... I didn’t know those things but I was able to do this things alone with God as well, you know?” Having a coping partner who shared similar circumstances, assisted Participant 2 with getting through the demands of being a project leader: “And I have a friend that studies the exact as me, and she is also involved in SRCS, and I think the two of us really carried each other at the end... and the beginning. Because she has the same situation as me, because our subjects are the exact same and we both now suddenly have SRCS, so I think we carried one another.” Having self-knowledge by being aware of own

limitations and strengths, enabled participants to further cope with their leadership positions and even lead to more effective performance: “I know it is in me, and I know the type of person I am” (Participant 2); “I don’t really have limits when it comes to this, I can limit myself when it comes to that.” (Participant 3); “You will, you can learn more effectively, you can engage more effectively, you can make the most of a moment if you know yourself” (Participant 3). Choosing to have a positive attitude and outlook towards challenging situations further assisted Participant 1 with coping: “...now I think I am more positive, where as I am gonna carry something with me, that I’ve never had before.” (Participant 1). From Participant 2’s experience, being a project leader became part of life: “So I think it is now built in, in our lives, so I think it is rather, I cannot stop with it, I have to continue with it somehow.”

#### **Theme 5: Psychological gains from being project leader**

Improvements in various aspects of the self were found to be the most prominent benefits the participants gained from their role as project leader. Participant 2’s self-esteem grew as a result of learning to manage time more effectively: “And I think time management was very difficult because I am not good with time, yes so it was an issue for me to adapt to it, to apply it but I think I eventually got it right, like I think I’m doing very well”. Being able to solve problems and to produce successful projects with limited resources, finances, transportation and support from other committee members, seemed to have a positive impact on their self-confidence: “ As I said, I also realized I can also do the leadership work that the project leaders do” (Participant 3). Participants learned more about themselves and others due to the exposure to people from different backgrounds during their term as project leader: “I put myself in different situations that I wouldn’t have without the SRCS, not at all, and I feel if you do SRCS you become exposed, you get exposed to things” (Participant 3); “...yes, because I was scared, by my own community, I was scared to become involved because I didn’t know what to expect and such things and when I became involved here [ on the SRCS committee] i realized it wasn’t that difficult and it was really very nice, you

get a nice feeling, you get a really nice feeling in your heart. So i believe when I go back I will not be scared” (Participant 2).

### **Theme 6: Psychological strenghts**

Grattitude for own lives and compassion for others less fortunate, were strenghts that participants gained as project leaders: “...to realize you have all these resources as a person and we are so privileged, I have this and I have that and people don’t have it, I am just random, randomly given, when you realize you are like wow I am not better than those that have nothing. That could have been me, I am not better that this person, I wear brands but it’s not as if, you still have that appreciation and gratitude to realize, wow I am in a great position.” (Participant 3).

The resilience and perseverance of participants were evident in the data as they continued as part of the committee despite having experienced adversity, still having the will to carry on as a participant stated “cause a lot of the people have actually said ‘no you can’t do that’ which, I’m still here... I think I’m learning it has been a learning experience, I been learning a lot stuff and the fact that I have open to uhm, being corrected, sometimes its harsh but take moving from there, from like not giving up so far” (Participant 1).

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to address the identified gap in literature by exploring the experience and psychological benefits of being involved with community engagement in a leadership position. The data reveal that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors and perceptions of the leadership position influenced the participants’ initial experiences of being a SRCS project leader. The data collected during this study where gathered in an exploratory nature from the participants, in which themes where identified and developed. This means that the researcher had no preconceived ideas or a hypothesis on the outcome of the study. The researcher found upon the completion of the analysis that the themes identified were directly proportionate with what the theory of motivation, i.e. SDT states. Within the discussion, we attempt to show the links within theory and the findings of this study. However, contrary to the majority of international research

studies conducted on SDT and leadership, the findings of the study highlight the project leaders' need for relatedness and competency, with less emphasis on autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Four additional psychological needs emerged from the data, which were also identified by Sheldon and colleagues (2001). These are increased self-esteem, pleasure/stimulation, popularity/influence and self-actualization/meaning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim & Kasser, 2001; Ryan, 2009).

Each of these needs can be described as a motivation for a particular class of behaviour as a goal towards need fulfilment (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Being able to relate to the different cultural backgrounds of the communities they served, broadened their perspectives and participants became more sensitive towards these cultural differences. Social change behaviours occurred as they adapted to the needs of the communities, altering their perspectives and using these opportunities to gather new information about the communities to plan more effective projects.

These experiences are similar to Netshandama, Maluleka and Kutame's (2011) study with participants displaying positive social change behaviours in redefining their outlook and perspectives to be more in line with the community's needs and not their own (Johnson, 2014).

They experienced this as an opportunity to step outside of their comfort zones to witness other individuals' living conditions and to hear stories about other people's backgrounds that they would not otherwise have heard or been exposed to. This experience also created a sense of gratitude for what they have in life and compassion for other people's living conditions and circumstances in life. The project leaders' feelings and expressions of gratitude were particularly strong when they saw the smiles on the people's faces when they have helped or when they felt as though they made an impact on someone's life. Gratitude is found to occur when the benefactor has provided a benefit incurring some personal cost and sacrifice, especially if it has value in the eyes of the beneficiary, and is therefore very relevant considering the changes participants made to benefit the communities (Kaczor, 2015).

Participants did not experience exposure to the SRCS committee's culture and background in the same way and struggled to relate or build trusting relationships within the committee. The lack of a supportive environment from the SRCS, as experienced by the participants, had some impact on work satisfaction, but they endured as project leaders based on feelings of accountability and responsibility towards the community (Lee & Teo, 2005). Other challenges and sacrifices they reported are in line with previous research. It includes losing friends, falling behind academically and having sleepless nights (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010).

Further challenges such as proving themselves as leaders while working with limited support and resources, struggles with time management, feelings of incompetency, and lack of self-care practices could leave participants feeling ineffective and incompetent (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010). However, the need for enhanced competency motivated participants to overcome these challenges by learning and applying better problem solving skills. They reported winning awards and running successful projects by meeting their objectives and having desirable outcomes despite a deficit in resources. It was evident from the participant's responses that along with the challenges they faced, they managed to overcome them. However, this has led to both positive and negative outcomes. The positive outcome was the development of their problem solving skills. The negative outcome was the participants' lack of trust in the committee.

The project leaders further experienced increased abilities in managing their time more effectively. They gained a sense of confidence in their abilities. Participants had to find ways in which they could balance all the important aspects of their lives. Some managed to get external assistance from family members who knew how to do time management. This taught the project leaders how to prioritize as they had to find ways to juggle the committee, academics, family and friendship, which more often than not failed, causing conflict in their lives.

Self-esteem also increased through the experience of competence. An increased feeling of competence allowed the project leaders to feel confident in their ability to make autonomous decisions regarding the important aspects of their projects.

The participants volunteered to become project leaders, therefore applying autonomy in making these decisions. They further experienced freedom to make decisions for the projects they were leading. Although Participant 3 experienced frustrations when external social pressures in the SRCS environment prevented this autonomy, participants mostly felt overwhelmed with the lack of support they experienced from the same environment, placing more emphasis on the need for relatedness (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). This could provide some insight into the participants' experience of expectations of relatedness while practicing autonomy. Emphasis is placed on the lack of support and relatedness with the SRCS committee, but none of them indicated their role in relating more with the team members in the various projects they were leading. This placed them in a double bind of experiencing some alienation and rejection as project leaders. The admiration and respect they received from the communities were therefore not a shared experience from the project committee members or supervisors, which possibly stems from the participants being conditioned to serve the community and not to serve the committee and its members as well (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010).

Participants' expectation of having an enjoyable experience further motivated them to join the SRCS, but it was their expectation to make a major contribution that could lead to noticeable change and recognition for their leadership, that motivated them to become a project leader, and not just a team member.

Participants emphasized their need for a meaningful life and experience, rather than just having a 'normal' life as a student to experience their lives as having a greater purpose (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010; Hein, 1999; Iwasaki, 2016). This motivation stemmed from their need to give back to the community to make a difference in someone's life, to be a part of something bigger and to be engaged, not wanting to run the risk of wasting their purpose in life (Compton, 2005).

People create and develop a sense of meaning in life in many ways, the avenue that resonates with the project leaders is service to others or dedication to a worthy cause, but it also

touches on sacrifice. The project leaders created a sense of meaning in their lives through sacrificing their time, relationships, and academics. We could say that participants acted in a more socially responsible, than personally responsible way (Johnson, 2014). The experience of feeling that they were contributing to the general wellbeing and welfare of the community and the individuals they come across and in some ways making a difference in the world, overshadowed their own personal needs. Feeling as though one is making a difference is one of the fundamental elements of a sense of meaning and purpose (Compton, 2005). The project leaders also felt as though they were dedicating themselves to a worthy cause or “being a part of something bigger”. This made them feel as though they were involved in issues larger than themselves (Compton, 2005; Hein, 1999).

Another means of creating meaning is in forming meaningful connections and relatedness with others. Although participants were able to form meaningful relationships with the communities, they experienced difficulty in maintaining meaningful personal relationships. They felt that this was a result of the committee consuming most of their time, and some participants even reportedly losing friends during their term as a project leader (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010). Compton (2015) explains that suffering in relation to meaning in life causes people to re-evaluate their lives. Losing close friends and facing various challenges resulted in the participants re-evaluating themselves and their abilities, which made them more aware of their psychological strengths of resilience and perseverance (Compton, 2005; Tugade, Fredrickson & Barrett, 2004).

Various coping strategies and resources were employed by the participants to persevere as project leaders. Religion, having a coping partner and good self-knowledge were mostly reported. Baumgardner and Crothers (2010) found that religion is not just a set of beliefs and practices, it also involves how these beliefs are used to answer life’s most profound questions and to cope with life’s most difficult challenges. Participants expressed how their belief in God and church structures cared and supported them through difficult challenges (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010; Tay & Diener, 2011). Making use of coping partners, who were also project leaders, created a

space for participants to experience not only sympathy, but empathy as well, as they were going through the same situation as the participants. These coping partners had a personal understanding of the situation. Self-knowledge assisted in coping with challenging situations as participants became more aware of their own limitations and strengths.

### **Conclusion**

Satisfying basic, universal needs motivated the participants in this study to volunteer for a leadership position in community engagement activities. Through this experience, participants gained various psychological benefits and strengths, which further motivated them to endure challenges as a result of this position, even when faced with adversity. Coping strategies developed out of these gains and participants employed unique strategies such as making use of a coping partner, and leaning on religion. This experience also enhanced their self-awareness, which enabled them to maintain a positive outlook towards the leadership position.

This study therefore contributed to increasing knowledge of the psychological benefits these project leaders gained through community engagement within a South African context.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CRITICAL REFLECTION**

As common as community engagement may sound, there is, surprisingly, a limited number of studies available on community engagement, especially in relation to students. Taken from the backdrop of Apartheid and the numerous issues that racial segregation brought on, the Higher Education Act of 1996 directed its aim at creating higher educational institutions that focus on restructuring and transformational programmes and institutions to address human resources, economics and development, with the expectation of readdressing discriminations brought on by Apartheid (Badat, 2010).

Universities have the duty of incorporating both the transferring of education and the promotion of community engagement among students (Badat, 2010). The aim of the SRCS committee for the past decade has been to train students to becoming effective project leaders and volunteers within community engagement and to improve the quality and relevance of the services provided to the communities (Weyers & Herbst, 2014).

Although studies have been conducted on community engagement, there is limited research on student participation within a South African context. The direction in which community engagement literature is heading focuses on the predictors and motivations of participation for the purpose of recruitment (Brayley, et al, 2014; Hyde & Knowles, 2013; Cruce & Moore, 2007). As recruitment is an important component of the promotion of community engagement among students, little to no emphasis is placed on the psychological benefits gained or what promotes long-term sustained participation. Students benefit from community engagement by gaining an increased sensitivity towards different cultures and ethnic groups by having the opportunity to meet new people, enjoy new experiences and learn new skills (Environmental Protection Agency, 2001; O'Leary, 2014). These benefits are mainly focused on the social benefits and not on the interpersonal/intrapersonal psychological benefits that

participants could possibly gain. The following research questions were formulated to address this gap.

### **Research question and main findings of the study**

The aim of the study was to explore from a qualitative approach how the SRCS project leaders of 2015/2016 experienced their involvement in a leadership position during community engagement activities at the North-West University. The two research questions formulated to achieve the aim were:

- 1) What was the 2015/2016 SRCS projects leaders' experience of their involvement in a leadership position participating in community engagement activities at the North West University?
- 2) What psychological benefits/rewards did they gain through this process?

Six themes emerged from the data namely, 1) perceptions of leadership, 2) challenges of a leadership position, 3) motivation for volunteering as a project leader, 4) coping with the demands of the position, 5) psychological gains obtained as project leader and 6) psychological strengths.

With regard to the first question, which focuses on the project leader's experience, the data revealed that the project leaders experienced a sense of responsibility and accountability towards the community members through their participation. They discovered that the responsibility they thought they would have was vastly different from the reality. They experienced a sense of autonomy with regard to making decisions and enjoyed their leadership position the most as they were the ones making decisions and giving out orders and not the ones taking them.

Relating to the second question, the findings revealed that the participants gained both psychological benefits and practical skills. The psychological benefits they gained were 1) self-knowledge, 2) exposure to people from different backgrounds, 3) self-confidence, and 4) gratitude and compassion. The practical skills they gained were mostly time management and problem-solving skills. The participants experienced challenges on both interpersonal and

intrapersonal levels. The psychological benefits that the project leaders gained resulted in them satisfying their basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competency (Compton, 2005).

### **Comparison to previous research**

Relating to previous research done on community engagement and its benefits, the findings of this study are broadly in line with Netshandama, Maluleka and Kutame's (2011) findings. Both South African studies and international studies reported benefits such as a sense of belonging, the ability to adjust to competing demands, the feeling of "doing good" and the re-evaluation of their purpose in life (Grimm, Springs & Dietz, 2007; Netshandama et al., 2011; Khanna, 2011). The findings of this study to some extent are at odds with those of international studies. International studies often focus on the motivational aspects of community engagement as the findings relate to extrinsic motivation such as career development, work-related experience, academic motivation and skills development (Cnaan *et al*, 2010; Clary & Snyder, 1999; Department of Education and Skills, 2007), whereas within this study we found that students' motivations were both intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic was focused on intrapersonal components such as autonomy, having the opportunity to push your limits, sense of accomplishment, life experience and the opportunity to pay it forward. The extrinsic motivation identified in the study related to making a difference, having a positive influence on someone's life, gaining acceptance and respect.

The findings also corroborates the Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) in that the project leaders excelled at their leadership role as the decision to become a project leader for the sample of this study was autonomously made. According to Self-determination Theory (SDT), the more autonomous the decision is, the greater the persistence, well-being and performance at any given activity (Ryan, 2009).

### **Limitations of the study**

The limitation of this study is that a small sample was used and that it was representative of a very small percentage of the South African student population. However, according to the IPA guidelines, the sample size of this study is appropriate for a student study (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Furthermore, this research was focused on the SRCS committee that is unique to the North West University (NWU), which meant that the sample is representative of a certain socio-economic demographic only.

### **Suggestions for further research**

It would be suggested that future research make use of quantitative measures to test the predictive volunteer behaviour of South African students. A suggested scale is the Voluntary Functional Inventory Scale (VFI) as it has been used before in research studies aiming to determine student motivation and the beneficial functions volunteering offers an individual (Clary & Snyder, 1999). There are no studies to date on volunteerism that make use of the VFI scale to understand volunteer behaviour within South Africa. It would be a further recommendation that a mixed method approach be employed for such a study as the scale has received negative reviews. Student's volunteer functions are measured within five domains namely values, social, career, protection and understanding functions (Clary & Snyder, 2009). Lastly, it is suggested that further studies in the South African context be undertaken with a focus on the psychological benefits individuals gain from community engagement within different contexts in South Africa.

### **Autobiographical reflections**

Undertaking this research study has been an invaluable experience for me. I gained a better understanding of the research process and the possible stumbling blocks one comes across when dealing with the human aspect of research especially. I have learnt that things do not always work out the way you have strategically planned and that because of the human aspect of research, the entire process is unpredictable. Anything could happen at any time.

This study has also provided me the opportunity to examine my personal and professional values in terms of what I am doing to giving back to the community. Having understood why the participants offer their time has made me think of why I would donate my time to volunteer, what my motivation would be at this point in my life and also what kind of need I would be trying to satisfy. The research process has encouraged me to examine the possible reasons as to why my participation would be consistent.

Being a novice researcher, my supervisors suggested I keep a reflective journal, which in retrospect was a great idea. With the reflective journal, I was able to write down my thoughts and ideas about my expectations of the research process. It allowed me to reflect and gain insight into the interview sessions and gave me the opportunity to improve on my interview techniques and the quality in which questions were asked. The journal provided me with a deeper understanding of the participants, as entries were made before and after the interview sessions. Reading through the journals after the data collection period indicated a change in my perspective as it related to the participants and led to me becoming more comfortable as I assumed the researcher role. The journal mainly protected against personal bias as this resulted in me questioning my attitudes towards different issues and situations that transpired during the interview sessions.

### **Final word**

Through the analysis of this study, themes emerged that were not anticipated by the research question. We discovered that the participant have a passion for the community and that they take their role as a leader seriously. We discovered that the committee and its structure should focus on nurturing relationships within the committee itself. The findings of this study can be used at this point to improve the programme so that the project leaders could have a much better experience. From the data it seems crucial that the project leaders receive training on time management, as this seems to be the cause of the majority of their issues. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of knowledge of community engagement in South Africa specifically focused on the psychological benefits of students within a university setting.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **English version**

#### **Opening questions to set the context:**

1. How long have you been involved in the SRCS?
2. What is your position in the SRCS?

#### **Questions to be asked during each interview:**

3. Tell me about how you experienced your involvement in a leadership position of an SRCS community engagement activity/
  - What did you hope to achieve through this involvement? (Psychological benefit)
  - What have you achieved through this involvement?
  - What about this experience will you take with you?
  - What do you value most about your leadership experience?
4. Tell me about the reasons why you became a SRCS project leaders?
  - How did you make the decision to become a project leader?
  - What did you take into account when you made the decision?
5. What does being a project leader feel like?
  - What about being involved in the SRCS was meaningful to you?
  - Why?
6. How do you foresee your involvement in future community service projects based on your experience with the SRCS
  - What will you take into account to make your deskin?

## Afrikaans version

### Openings vrae om die konteks vas te stel:

1. Hoe lank is jy betrokke by SJGD?
2. Wat is jou posisie by die SJGD?

### Vrae om te vra gedurende elke onderhoud:

3. Vertel my van ou ondervindinge om betrokke te wees as 'n leier in SJGD gemeenskaps aktiwiteit?
  - Wat het jy gehoop om te bereik deur heirdie betrokkrnheid? (redes waarom jy 'n projek leier geword het en motivering daarvoor)
  - Wat het jy bereik duer heirdie betrokkenheid? (Ondersoek na sielkundige voordeel)
  - Watter gedeelte van hierdie ondervinding sal jy saam met jou neem? (Ondersoek na toekomstige betrokkenheid)
  - Wat waardeer jy die meeste van jou leierskaps ervaring?
4. Vertel my waarom jy 'n SJGD projek leier geword het?
  - Hoe het jy hierdie besluit geneem om 'n projek leier te word?
  - Wat het jy in ag geneem toe jy hierdie besluit geneem het?
5. Hoe voel dit om 'n projek leier te wees?
  - Wat van jou betrokkenheid in SJGD was betekenisvol vir jou?
  - Waarom?
6. Hoe sien jy jou betrokkenheid in toekomstige gemeenskaps projekte gebaseer op jou ervaring met SJGD?
  - Wat gaan jy in ag neem om hierdie besluit te neem?