

**UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
JOHANNESBURG**



**Exploring the experiences that influence academic success of socio-economically
disadvantaged postgraduate students at the University of Witwatersrand.**

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Community-Based Counselling Psychology.

Declaration

I declare that this research report titled “Exploring the experiences that influence academic success of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students at the University of Witwatersrand” is my own original work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Community-Based Counselling Psychology, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any other degree at another university.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dungaba', is positioned above a horizontal line.

Charlotte Joja

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University of the Witwatersrand

Johannesburg

Acknowledgments

First, I thank God for affording me this opportunity to shed light of the experiences and hardships that socio-economically disadvantaged students encounter in higher education. I am thankful and blessed to be on this journey of impacting and changing lives. I have only come this far by the grace, mercy, and faithfulness of God.

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Abstract

This research report explores the experiences that influence academic success of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students at the University of Witwatersrand. This research study seeks to examine the experiences that have contributed to their attainment of academic success in higher education. This study utilised a qualitative research design in order to gain a thorough understanding into the students' shared experiences. The data collected from 11 socio-economically disadvantaged students using semi-structured interviews were analysed and thematically coded to understand the themes and meaning of the information provided. The results revealed specific factors that influence the attainment of academic success amongst students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These influencing factors include student funding, socio-economic status, adjustment issues, language, writing skills, motivation, availability of resources, academic and social support. The research report therefore concludes to highlight that due to the historical inequalities experienced in South Africa during apartheid, Black socio-economically disadvantaged students still face enormous challenges in attaining academic success in higher education. This research report recommends that South African Universities seek to fully understand the university experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged students in order to foster increased student academic success amongst these students in higher education.

Keywords: academic success, postgraduate students, socio-economically disadvantaged, higher education experiences, student funding, ecological systems model

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Terminology
AD	Academic Development
CCDU	Counselling and Careers Development Unit
CHE	Council of Higher Education
DOE	Department of Education
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/ Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
IAEEA	International Association of Evaluation of Education Achievement
IPA	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
NBT	National Benchmarking Test
NEA	National Education Association
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
PMA	Postgraduate Merit Award
REAP	Rural Educational Access Programme
SAUS	South African Union of Students
SRC	Student Representative Council

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Exploring the Experiences That Influence Academic Success of Socio-economically Disadvantaged Postgraduate Students at The University of Witwatersrand

This research report explores the experiences that influence the academic success of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students in the Humanities at the University of Witwatersrand. The factors influencing the academic achievement and academic success among low socio-economic disadvantaged students, remains a prominent area of research and a matter of concern for various institutional bodies in South Africa. The post 1994 policies that were aimed at widening access of higher education, have led to an increased number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering universities. This therefore means that a greater percentage of South African students are entering university from positions of extreme inequality (Chetty & Pather, 2015). However, many of these students do not complete their qualifications due to various of reasons, including poor course choice, adjustment issues and other social circumstances. The emerging challenges experienced by these students influence their academic success, therefore either promoting or impeding on their attainment of academic success. This study therefore seeks to explore how certain postgraduate students from a low socio-economic status (SES) have persevered to achieve and attain academic success. This study seeks to document their experiences and the strategies they employed in attaining academic success. The purpose of this study is thus to provide a conceptualisation of the influencing factors of the academic achievement of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students. This introduction chapter seeks to provide the reader with background information to this study. Included in the discussion are the aims of the research study, the rationale, the significance of this study, and the general overview of the structure of this research report.

Aims

The aim of this research study is to uncover the experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students who are academically successful, and to explore the

strategies employed in attaining academic success. Therefore, this study explores these students' views of how they were able to continue progressing in their studies in the light of experiencing various challenges and hindrances in pursuit of a higher education qualification. The study further aims to fully understand the stressors (challenges) faced by these students during their academic journeys. The study also aims to understand how these students view the level of support provided to them by the university (including lecturers, tutors, mentors) and by their families and community. Analysis of these experiences is used to create a holistic perspective of factors that positively and negatively influenced the academic success of these students.

Rationale

There have been various studies that have focused on the importance of education, particularly higher education (Boughey, 2010; Mzangwa, 2019; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018; Tinto, 1975). For some, higher education qualifications not only safeguard a better future for the student but also for future generations to come (Van Vuuren, 2014). This standpoint is significant as it affirms the aftereffects of the historical context of political and socio-economic oppression under apartheid in South Africa. The 1994 democratic elections brought about policy reform to address educational inequalities that were entrenched in higher educational institutions in South Africa (Tanga & Maphosa, 2018). These policies were formed by the Council of Higher Education (CHE) in order to introduce provisions to achieve increased access of historically disadvantaged students into higher education (Tanga & Maphosa, 2018). This shift enabled students to enter university from positions of extreme inequality (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018).

The interdependent nature of primary, secondary, and tertiary education remains a challenge in the South African education system (Chetty & Pather, 2015). The education system has been overwhelmed with the socio-economic conditions that impede on and hinder the academic achievement of students. These conditions are the direct aftereffects of separate development pre-1994 which meant impoverished areas were deprived of

resources creating a gap in students' skills and knowledge (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Tanga and Maphosa (2018) assert "this state of affairs is characterised by poor academic writing and performance in tests, assignments and examinations, with only twenty nine percent of students being able to complete their degree courses within the stipulated periods" (p. 2). This demonstrates that South African universities are not sufficiently prepared to cater for the new cohort of students who now have access to higher education (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018), affirming the distressingly low pass and retention rates witnessed in higher education.

The student movements and protests in 2015 calling for social change in South African universities, further demonstrate the shortcomings and failures of transformation in South African universities (Tjønneland, 2017). These protests and movements highlighted the hidden challenges experienced by Black students due to socio-economic conditions which hinder their academic performance and participation in university. This demonstrates that context greatly influences the academic performance of students (Tanga & Maphosa, 2018). Therefore, contextual factors are also seen to greatly influence and impact historically disadvantaged student in their attainment of academic success.

Within this research report, students from disadvantaged backgrounds refer to the cohort of students that fall under low-socio-economic status and those who are categorised as historically disadvantaged. There is little known on the influencing factors that impact on and facilitate academic success amongst students who are fall under a low socio-economic status. Therefore, this research study will analyse the experiences of these students to better understand the academic and environmental obstacles experienced and endured in their attainment of academic success. The findings obtained from this study are aimed at assisting forthcoming socio-economically disadvantaged students in implementing similar strategies in their attainment of academic success. The objective of this research study is to understand the experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged students that have influenced their attainment of academic success, and thus the research question is: What

are the experiences that influence the academic success of disadvantaged postgraduate students at the University of Witwatersrand, studying in the field of Humanities?

Significance of Study

When analysing literature, researchers have examined the impact of the experiences of disadvantaged students on their access to higher education and have more specifically analysed their retention rates (Chetty & Pather, 2015; Hupfeld, 2010; Naong et al., 2009; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018; Tinto, 1975). Due to the dominance of research focusing on retention rates and access to higher education of these students, less research focuses on their academic achievement, particularly those students completing their qualifications at the University of the Witwatersrand. Therefore, the primary focus of this research study is the economic, social, and educational experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students in order to analyse the impact and influence of these factors on their academic achievement. This research study therefore draws attention to the attainment of academic success of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students in higher education. Research has also mainly focused on the challenges faced by undergraduate socio-economically disadvantaged students, however, overlooking challenges experienced by students pursuing a postgraduate degree. According to Mouton et al. (2013), the level of postgraduate enrolment and graduation is low and unsatisfactory. The Public Service Association (2016) reported that across the South African population, “only 0,75% have a postgraduate qualification” (p. 2). This study seeks to analyse postgraduate students who have attained academic success by having graduated and through receiving a tertiary degree. Gaining such knowledge, into the experiences and challenges faced by these cohort of students, could assist in informing effective and appropriate strategies and supportive initiatives to assist incoming students in attaining academic success.

Structure of the Research Report

Mentioned below is the layout of this research report. This research report comprises of five broad chapters discussed below, namely, the introductory chapter, the literature

review, the research methodology, the findings and discussion, and the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 1 presents an introduction to the research study. Within this chapter the research aims, rationale and the structure of the research report are discussed and further detailed. The aim of this chapter is to introduce the research topic under investigation and to provide an overview of the research study.

Chapter 2 presents all the literature that has been reviewed relating to academic success and the transformational process within higher education in South Africa. This chapter provides the reader with a synopsis of the literature that exists pertaining to higher education in South Africa, academic success, and student challenges including historical, political, and social factors. This chapter also makes reference to the theoretical framework employed, located within community psychology, to further aid in one's understanding of the student within the educational sphere and also other spheres that influence and shape the student.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the research study. This chapter expands on the research design and the employed paradigm. The selection criteria and key characteristics of participants are presented. The method of data collection is discussed and detailed. The methods of data analysis are then presented followed by the research rigour, the researcher's reflexivity, and the ethical considerations pertaining to this study.

Chapter 4 presents the findings and discussion of the research results. This section discusses and elaborates on the viewpoints and perceptions of the postgraduate students pertaining to their own academic success and educational journeys, including the challenges that they may have experienced in pursuit of academic achievement. The data that is obtained through the research method techniques is presented in this chapter by use of broad themes. These broad themes are discussed to facilitate understanding into the experiences of the academically successful disadvantaged students. Finally, each theme is

analysed in relation to the body of literature presented in order to identify areas that correlate and those that differ, in order to identify how the study furthers our knowledge of this topic.

Chapter 5 presents the reader with the concluding section, where the researcher highlights the understanding of the experiences of the postgraduate students, and it further emphasises how these experiences have contributed to their attainment of academic success. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the key discoveries of this study and to make recommendation for future research and intervention endeavours.

Conclusion

Although many years have passed since the emergence of South Africa as a democratic country, the aftereffects and historical footprints of apartheid are still witnessed. These results of the countries historical past are therefore translated in the access and achievement rates of socio-economically disadvantaged students in higher education. This therefore is evidenced through the vast number of socio-economically disadvantaged students dropping out of university. However, some of these students still manage to succeed in their studies and attain academic success. This research study will therefore analyse these students and their experiences to uncover the strategies employed in their attainment of academic success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that informs the study, presents the key concepts of the research study, and provides a review of pertinent literature in the study area. The chapter begins by exploring Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) ecological systems theory, which is used in this study as an overarching theoretical framework for exploring the unique experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students in higher education. This study therefore includes an analysis of the individual, familial and environmental factors that influence the academic success of socio-economically disadvantaged students. The ecological systems will thus be used to discuss and analyse how students interact with the connected systems and how these systems influence and affect the students and their academic progression in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

A study conducted in the United States found that institutional conditions influenced students' persistence in attaining academic success (Loh et al., 2021). This study also suggests that students interact with the interconnected environmental systems influencing their academic success (Loh et al., 2021). With the socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students chosen for this study, this statement emphasises the need to examine the student's relationships within and outside the university environment in order to analyse how these relationships affect their development and attainment of academic success. This study has employed Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in order to conceptualise and better understand the postgraduate students' development, interactions and relationships, to analyse how each social system impacts on the student.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory assists one in understanding how a person grows and develops within interconnected ecosystems (Mulisa, 2019). It therefore asserts that the inherent characteristics of a person and their environment interact and influence how they grow and develop (Loh et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner studied the

dependence between man and the environment and further analysed human development (Härkönen, 2007). He defines development as the following:

The process through which the growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, as cited in Leonard, 2011, p. 4)

Bronfenbrenner further states that when analysing human development, a single lens focus on a person should not be adopted, however focus should be placed on the interactions of the person within their various environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Thus, he states that the way a person develops and how they are socialised is greatly influenced by their interactions with the surrounding environment (Härkönen, 2007). According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), this theory of development is therefore informed by the ecology of human development, which he explains as:

The scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded. (p. 514)

Bronfenbrenner's theory therefore asserts that people exist and develop within multiple interconnected ecological systems (Loh et al., 2021). His model therefore "attempts to account for the influences of the individual (person), their interactions with the environment, the responses they receive from the environment (process), their interactions within the immediate settings (contexts), and the influences of changing sociocultural influences (time)" (Loh et al., 2021, p. 88). His theory therefore posits that a person influences their environment whilst the environment requires the person to adapt to its statutes (Härkönen, 2007). The ecological systems model consists of five socioecological systems, namely: the

microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Mulisa, 2019). Explored below are these five socioecological systems that impinge on and direct student behaviour.

The Individual Level

Within the ecological systems theory, the person is placed in the middle or center of the system (Mulisa 2019). This system emphasises the person's biology/genetics as the primary environment for development (Härkönen, 2007). This system also highlights that a person's qualities influence their interaction with the different ecological systems in which they grow (Mulisa 2019).

This framework enables researchers to conceptualise students' characteristics in higher education (Mulisa, 2019). It expands on student characteristics that influence their academic outcomes, such as sex, religion, learning styles, health conditions, life-events, and student's level of maturation (Mulisa, 2019). Geven et al. (2017, as cited in Mulisa, 2019) studied the different academic outcomes of male and female students and found that female students acquire higher grade averages than male students and are less likely to drop out of school. Therefore, in order to analyse student experiences, an exploration of biological and personal characteristics of students is necessary in understanding the factors that influence their educational outcomes.

The Microsystem Level

The microsystem "is a complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g., home, school, workplace)" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). This system therefore refers to a person's innermost social system where the developing person is shaped by the environment (Mulisa, 2019). The microsystem thus refers to a person's closest environment in which they have direct contact (Härkönen, 2007).

Within the student's context, this includes students' relations with other students, teacher-student relations, educational resources, student counselling and other supportive

services, leisure times and family (Mulisa, 2019). It therefore refers to the immediate setting that students consistently interact with including the relationships with others (Leonard, 2011). With regards to the postgraduate students and their campus environment, this includes the student-lecturer relations that affect the students' learning process, the students' relations with other students on campus and in lecture halls, students' relations with academic mentors and the administrative staff members at the university, their family structure and other situations that affect their behaviour and educational outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial that institutions and policy makers consider the various microsystem factors when analysing student academic success.

The Mesosystem Level

Bronfenbrenner asserts that the mesosystem involves "the interrelations among major settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant" (Bronfenbrenner 1977, p. 515). This system is the second innermost social ecology, and it encompasses all the processes and interconnections of the microsystem (Mulisa, 2019). It therefore refers to lateral connections and cross relationships of the small settings seen in the microsystem (Leonard, 2011). The mesosystem therefore relates to various microsystems interacting with one another (Zhang, 2018) and includes the interactions between the family, school, peers, church, or workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

In this research study, the postgraduate students interact with their university and home environments. These students spend most of their time within these environments (Loh et al., 2021). These two interacting microsystems can influence a student's academic performance (Mulisa, 2019). Therefore, the interconnectivity of microsystems, according to Renn and Arnold (2003), will affect a student's integration and persistence (as cited in Loh et al., 2021).

The Exosystem Level

The next system denotes to the exosystem. This system is described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as "consists of one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an

active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by what happens in the setting” (p. 237). This setting includes the employment of family members and public media which impact on a person’s development (Mulisa, 2019).

As mentioned, although the student does not influence this system, the environmental setting still impacts the student (Loh et al., 2021). An example of this within the South African context, is the requirement for the National Benchmark Test (NBT) to be written by all prospective first year students in order to gain entrance into higher education institutions. These students are not actively involved in the policies developed by the South African government, however they are affected by these policies and requirements. Other exosystem level elements that may affect students include family issues, social relationships, university policies, curriculum requirements and financial aid schemes (Loh et al., 2021; Mulisa, 2019).

The Macrosystem Level

The next system denotes to macrosystem, which according to Bronfenbrenner (1977):

Refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exosystems are the concrete manifestations. Macrosystems are conceived and examined not only in structural terms but as carriers of information and ideology that, both explicitly and implicitly, endow meaning and motivation to particular agencies, social networks, roles, activities, and their interrelations. (p. 515)

This system is the outermost system, and it represents the broader level (Zhang, 2018). It involves the broader culture and ideological beliefs, political trends and community practices that impact on a person’s development (Mulisa, 2019). This system therefore includes any group (culture or subculture) where the members share the same values, belief systems, resources, opportunity structures and patterns of social interchange (Loh et al., 2021).

Bronfenbrenner asserts that “most macrosystems are informal and are found in minds of

society members as ideology made manifest through custom and practice in everyday life” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515).

The various macrosystem level elements that impact student achievement include socio-economic status, cultural values, technological backgrounds, curricula, and political systems (Mulisa, 2019). These elements affect a students’ effectiveness in higher education and should be understood and analysed according to students’ experiences and needs (Mulisa, 2019).

The Chronosystem Level

According to Bronfenbrenner (1986, p. 40), the chronosystem is “the influence on a person’s developmental changes (and continues) overtime in the environments in which the person is living”. The chronosystem therefore emphasises that all the social systems change with time (Leonard, 2011). This system emphasises the life transition of the developing person whilst highlighting the passage of time and socio-historical circumstances (Mulisa, 2019). Loh et al. (2021) therefore state that an “individuals’ life learning and developmental processes are likely to vary according to specific historical events, the influence of generations, social movements and popular social or cultural trends” (Loh et al., 2021, p. 89). Variables of the chronosystem therefore involve socio-economic history, family structure, place of residence and employment (Mulisa, 2019). It is therefore important to include chronosystem level variables when analysing and transforming educational practices in higher education (Mulisa, 2019).

Theoretical Application of the Ecological Systems Theory

Vincent Tinto (1975) proposed a model of student retention which employs the mesosystem and exosystem (Loh et al., 2021). Tinto suggests that there is a link between students’ academic motivation and institutional characteristics (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). They therefore highlights the connection between the student and the institutional environment by theorising that those students who are able to academically integrate into university are more likely to successfully complete their qualifications (Loh et al., 2021).

Therefore, central to his conceptualisation is the concept of academic and social integration. Therefore, they proposes that a student's academic trajectory is determined by their level of social and academic integration (Draper, 2008). Therefore, according to Hlalele (2015):

Factors such as teaching styles, support from faculty members and exposure to academic facilities are influential in the manner in which a student is able to establish academic integration; whereas factors such as the ability to pay tuition fees, family matters and personal attributes contribute to social integration. (p. 20)

However, according to Martin (2010, as cited in Loh et al., 2021), two students that interact in similar setting may have varying outcomes due to differential motivations. Therefore, Loh et al. (2021) argue that Tinto's model places great focus on integration whilst it "neglects the motivational orientations of students and/or existing in different ecological contexts" (p. 89).

According to Loh et al. (2021), due to Tinto's model's failure to include interactions amongst university students that occur across ecological systems, they proposed a model that incorporates environmental influence in analysing a student's academic persistence. Their approach which analyses academic ecological systems and expands on the student's interactions with the different systems (Loh et al., 2021). Below is their proposed model on academic ecological systems.

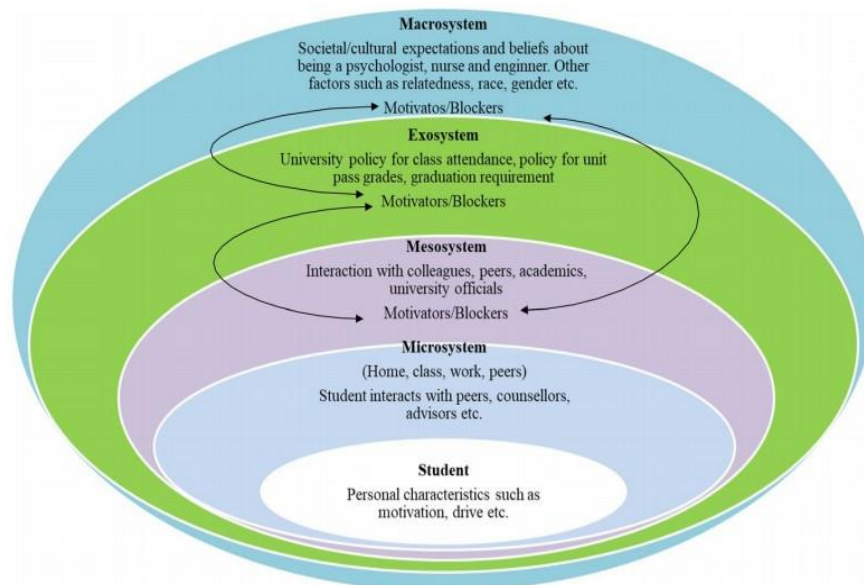


Figure 1: Model of Academic Ecological Systems (Loh et al., 2021, p. 91).

Loh et al. (2021) therefore assert that “student persistence is not just about being highly involved in the academic and social activities at the university” (p. 102), however unique to their model is the incorporation of the ecological systems to further expand on student persistence (Loh et al., 2021).

Translated into the context of the postgraduate students in this study, these assertions therefore mean that the students exist within multiple layers of social relationships. Therefore they operate in a context which is constantly changing and one that is influenced by the relationships from the microsystem (family and friends), the exosystem (different organisations and the community) and the macrosystem (their culture and society). Bronfenbrenner’s conceptual framework, therefore highlights the complex relationships of family/home, university and community whilst also paying attention to the development of the individual postgraduate student. This theory therefore pays much focus on the developing student who is situated within different ecological systems and environments which are interconnected and consequently influence one another (Härkönen, 2007). Upon analysing the ecological systems theory, this research employs this framework to expand on the conceptualisation of academic success amongst socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students.

Academic Success

According to Goni et al. (2015), the education system revolves around the academic performance of students (Goni et al., 2015). Further, the inquiry of persistence in degree completion has been a commonly examined topic amongst researchers. Therefore, the academic performance of students and their graduation rates have thus been an important area of focus in research, especially for higher education institutions (Shahzadi & Ahmad, 2011).

According to Voight and Hundrieser (2008, as cited in Perger & Takacs, 2016) “In higher education student success statistically is measured by the graduation rate, which is defined as percentage of students entering an institution who graduate within 4, 5 or 6 years

with a baccalaureate degree” (p. 121). However, research also demonstrates that one cannot only describe student success as attaining an academic qualification (Perger & Takacs, 2016). The American Federation of Teachers of Higher Education define student success “as the achievement of the student’s own educational goal” rather than degree attainment (Perger & Takacs, 2016, p. 121). It is therefore clear that research bodies and institutions need to adopt a holistic approach when thinking about student achievement and academic success. Schroeder (2011, as cited in Perger & Takacs, 2016) who researched at-risk students found that the students defined success in various ways. Some students expressed that acquiring a career is what determined whether they were successful whilst other students spoke to the importance of growth and learning and the attainment of a degree (Perger & Takacs, 2016). Research is now evolving from analysing risk factors towards examining conditions, traits, situations, and events that enable individuals to overcome life stressors (Bonnie, 1991). Thus, more recent studies now focus on exploring the overall factors that affect a university students’ academic performance.

In South Africa, the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), researched the factors which influence the success of previously disadvantaged students (Jones et al., 2008). This programme analysed poor rural youth and an array of factors that impact their access and success in completing their higher educational studies (Jones et al., 2008). This study therefore asserts that a rural background may negatively affect ‘student success. They further found that lack of finances was the key cause for student drop out (Jones et al., 2008).

Literature on learning states that aspects such as a student motivation, social and academic environment and other varying psychosocial factors contribute to a student’s ability to attain academic success (Fraser & Killen, 2003). Hansen (2000) reported that there are various factors that influence and impact on a students’ academic performance. Simmons et al. (2005, as cited in Shahzadi & Ahmad, 2011) concluded that factors such as a family’s socio-economic status, student tuition finances and a student’s academic

behaviour, affect a student's persistence in university. Further, Hijazi and Naqavi (2006) concluded that the age and educational level of a student's mothers also affects a student's academic performance. Therefore, existing research has demonstrated that a number of influencing factors impact on a student's academic performance in higher education institutions. Considering that so many factors are vital in attaining academic success, single measures that are assumed to produce academic success in university are not strong predictors of success, but a better predictor would be the combination of all these various measures (Fraser & Killen, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial that research emphasises the interplay between students, their chosen higher education institution, and their social environments. Perna and Thomas (2008) emphasises the need for academic research around the academic achievement and academic success of students to pay close attention to the student's holistic context (e.g. individual, family, education and social context), rather than research focusing solely on traits or characteristics that inform academic performance. Therefore, this study focuses on the personal, social, and academic factors which contribute to students' attainment of academic success.

Application of Ecological Systems Theory

The main focus of this study is to analyse the experiences that influence academic success amongst socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students. This study therefore postulates that there are selective influencing factors that impact a student's attainment of academic success. Using the ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner, this study acknowledges that there are complex interactions within the multilevel social ecological systems that impinge on and affect the student. Therefore, this implies that the attainment of academic success is not only based on the students' competence, but acknowledges the influence of personal, social, and ecological variables that affect a student's attainment of academic success. A holistic approach is needed to highlight the interplay between the postgraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their socio-ecological environments. The section below applies the different social

systems explored in the ecological systems model to socio-economically disadvantaged students and their experiences in higher education.

Individual Factors Influencing Academic Success

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the person is in the centre of the ecological system (Mulisa, 2019). This system emphasises the person's biology/genetics as the primary environment for development (Härkönen, 2007) and further highlights the influence of the persons characteristics on their interactions with the different systems (Mulisa, 2019). The internal context of a student, their cognitive and non-cognitive process, are important factors that affect the student's success (Perna & Thomas, 2008). The ecological systems theory is therefore a useful model in assisting one to understand students at an individual level and to expand on students' characteristics in higher education (Mulisa, 2019). Students' personal characteristics that are discussed below include psychological factors, motivation, language, faith and spirituality, major life events and mental health. There are various other personal characteristics that apply to higher education students, however these abovementioned characteristics have been chosen in accordance with the student cohort analysed in this study.

Psychological Factors. Historical research focuses on explaining predictors of academic achievement based on cognitive abilities and by means of intellectual tests (Vedel & Poropat, 2017). These writings and findings emphasised that intelligence can reliably predict the academic performance of students (Vedel & Poropat, 2017). However, according to Mihaela (2015), psychological factors which go beyond one's intellectual ability, influence one's academic achievement. Researchers have however expanded on personality traits that may predict academic achievement (Hazrati-Viari et al., 2012). The rationale for using personality traits to predict higher education student academic achievement emphasises that personality reflects what an individual will do instead of what they can do (O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007, as cited in Hazrati-Viari et al., 2012). According to Hakimi et al. (2011),

students possess distinctive personality characteristics that influence how they behave in education settings.

The big five personality characteristics of neuroticism, extroversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness are used in literature to explain the correlation evidenced between a student's personality traits and their level of academic achievement. Researchers and scholars have also emphasised the relationship between a student's academic success and their emotional intelligence (Hakimi et al, 2011; Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Hakimi et al. (2011) assert that all learners are different across various psychological variables. They are not only different in relation to personality factors, however they possess different attitudes and emotional responses to their environment (Hakimi et al., 2011). A study conducted by Nonis et al. (2005) found that feelings of inadequacy and positivity predict a student level of academic success, together with their intellectual ability. Temperament is also seen to influence student's academic experiences (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Studies of temperament have identified direct (the impact of negative emotionality on the internalisation of circumstances) and indirect (the impact of temperament and social context on outcomes) effects that influence student behaviour (Taylor & Gebre, 2016).

Furthermore, many researchers tend to ponder on the reasons why certain students who experience hardship and live in challenging circumstances academically succeed, whilst others who experience similar, if not the same circumstances, fail. This phenomenon can be aligned to resilience, which is described as a self-protective characteristic that an individual possesses, along with the experiences they encounter, that enable them to adapt to hardship (Masten et al., 1990). It's draws attention to one's ability to cope with adversity and stress (Begun, 1993). Academic resilience refers to the ability that enables a student to effectively deal and cope with academic pressure and anxiety (Martin, 2002). Thus, certain individuals may surrender to stress and adversity whilst others overcome these life threats (Rutter, 1987). Literature also confirms that resilience can be embedded systemically (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011), as one's social system enhances their potential to become

resilient in varying circumstances (Thomsen, 2002). According to Dass-Brailsford (2005), academic success in South Africa correlates with student's resilience capacity.

Overall, various studies demonstrate that the individual level plays an influential role in students' attainment of academic success. However, subsequent research demonstrates the influence of social ecology on students' experiences. Miheala (2014) states that "intelligence is only one of the elements belonging to the internal factors of academic performance" (p. 1634). This perspective focuses on test performance as a determinant for student academic success and it disregards the influence of socio-ecological and personal factors on student's achievement (Mulisa, 2019). Therefore, literature now pays close attention on the influence of psychosocial factors on students' ability to attain academic success (Perger & Takacs, 2016).

Motivation. According to Ryan and Deci (2000) being motivated relates to one's ability to be moved to complete a task. Therefore "a person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is thus characterised as unmotivated, whereas someone who is energised or activated toward an end is considered motivated" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 54). They further describe that people differ in their level and type of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students' academic motivation focuses mainly on the type of motivation as it expands on the reasons ('why') for completing tasks and achieving academic goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation can also be described as "a pre-requisite of and a necessary element for student engagement in learning" (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012, p. 252). Students within university are seen to be more autonomous and self-determined when it comes to their academic experience (Wu, 2019). Student engagement and motivation is influenced by one's attainment of a desired outcome and to their psychological needs being met (Wu, 2019). Therefore, motivation is believed to contribute to students' level of interest in and pleasure in education (Martin, 2002).

Academic motivation referring to "the students' desire or interest in engaging with learning and their school experience" (Wu, 2019, p. 99) is further analysed as a factor

influencing academic success. Wilkesmann et al. (2012), describe academic motivation as “motivation to learn” (p. 4). They assert that learning and achievement influence one’s motivation to study, and that learning processes are naturally part of academic motivation (Wilkesmann et al., 2012). According to Petersen et al. (2009), academic motivation and self-esteem are important to the success of disadvantaged students. When a student positively interacts with the learning process, their engagement develops a desire to persist and achieve goals in spite of the adversity experienced (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012).

Research on academic motivation focuses on the theoretical framework of Deci and Ryan (1985), the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This theory outlines the different types of motivation which lead one to perform a certain behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The primary types of motivation emphasised in this theory, is intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The first type of motivation, intrinsic motivation, refers to “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather for some separable cause. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun of the challenge entailed rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 56). Therefore, this type of motivation is directed by the inherent pleasure derived from completing or achieving a task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation therefore expands on one’s desire to engage in tasks that are influenced from the individual’s interest or pleasure (Wu, 2019). According to Wilkesmann et al. (2012), intrinsic motivation is dependent on the relationship between the need for independence, competence and the social environment. Therefore, emphasising that if a behaviour is not controlled by external forces, then individuals’ actions are self-determined (Wilkesmann et al., 2012). Studies demonstrate that students who are intrinsically motivated perform better in university and display a positive attitude on their abilities and the academic learning (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Further, internal locus of control is also seen to enable academically successful disadvantaged students in their studies (McMillan & Reed, 1993). Many students who fail exhibit an external locus of control and blame others or events outside of themselves for their own failure (Peng et al., 1992).

Extrinsically motivated individuals perceive their behaviour as result of external factors (Hazrati-Viari et al., 2012). Extrinsic motivation therefore “pertains to whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 58). It therefore expands on one’s engagement in tasks in hopes of receiving an external reward (Wu, 2019).

Taking into consideration the framework of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), academic motivation is seen to influence students’ academic achievement, including students’ university achievement (marks), retention and persistence, choice of major and field choice, graduation and psychological wellbeing (Wu, 2019). Academic engagement is also seen as a positive correlate to a students’ academic outcomes (Wu, 2019). Student engagement depends on one’s expectancy of success and the value they place in learning (Wu, 2019). Thus, student engagement is positively related to student academic success. A student’s academic motivation is therefore seen to have an influence of students’ ability to academically perform in university (Wu, 2019).

Language. Multilingualism is a common aspect of South African society. As South Africa has 11 official languages, it becomes a complex task when having to decide the common language (Mzangwa, 2019). During the years of apartheid, language was used as an oppressive tool, particularly in the education system. In 1976, Black students confronted the education system of that time, and embarked on nationwide student protests for the abolishment of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction (Mzangwa, 2019). Therefore, language was seen to either promote or hinder their learning experience. Despite the government’s effort in improving education post 1994, academic achievement amongst South African learners remains poor, and language has been identified as an influential factor given the country’s historical background and multilingual context (Prinsloo et al., 2018).

Mulisa (2019), states that a students’ linguistic background can have an effect on their academic achievement, especially if the course content is not in their mother tongue. According to Mzangwa (2019), 42% of South Africans speaks an Nguni language as their first or home language. However, there seems to be academic ignorance on the importance

of the mother tongue and multilingualism in bridging the gap of academic language (Madiba, 2012). When speaking on the academic failure levels in higher education, language is seen to be an important contributing factor (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015). The medium of instruction in university is seen as a significant barrier to the academic success level of students (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015). Stephen et al. (2004) state that most Black students who pass English in the matriculation exams, do so with English being a second language. Therefore, these students enter university, with English being their second language. Therefore, many learners find themselves at disadvantaged as they need to learn for the first time in English (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015). Thus, their poorer English proficiency thus affects their academic achievement (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015). Mavundle and Motimele (2002, as cited in Stephen et al., 2004) state that Black students “often have to decode English into their mother tongue and then reinterpret their thoughts into English, considerable potential for misinterpretation occurs” (p. 45). Students therefore struggle to communicate their views and opinions on academic content which further contributes to the high failure rate experienced in higher education. Therefore, the lack of English proficiency which impacts understanding of course content and poor writing skills impacts socio-economically disadvantaged students’ potential to attain academic success. Language is therefore seen as a crucial facet affecting students in higher education (Mzangwa, 2019).

Furthermore, previously disadvantaged students that come from primary and secondary school environments where English was not the primary medium of instruction, now enter higher education and have to adapt to the discourse dominant academic environment (Stephen et al., 2004). The first year of university is already hard for most students as they have to learn basic concepts in various fields before they can engage with their application to the content presented (Naong et al., 2009). However, Black students now have to master English as the medium of instruction in order to complete all their course requirements and expectations (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Therefore, the use of language in

higher education poses as a fundamental obstacle in attaining academic success for many Black students in South Africa (Mouton et al., 2013).

Faith and Spirituality. Religious beliefs are perceived to be central aspect of society as they guide the behaviour of individuals (Wang et al., 1993). Faith and spirituality can further instil and sustain hope in individuals and allow for meaning making (Dass-Brailsfor, 2005). Faith and spirituality can therefore offer individuals an opportunity to create meaning, especially through adverse circumstances (Werner, 1997). Religion and spirituality have thus been identified as protective factors for socio-economically disadvantaged students (Wang et al., 1993). Faith and spirituality has also been highlighted in literature as an important facet of higher education (Li & Murphy, 2018). According to Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011), faith and spirituality is seen as an independent variable affecting and influencing academic achievement. Additionally, researchers are now asserting the importance of students' religious identities on their engagement in higher education (Li & Murphy, 2018). Therefore, religious affiliation, practices and rituals are seen to have an effect an academic outcome of students (Mulisa, 2019). Further, according to Li and Murphy (2018), religion and spirituality not only affects academic performance however it impacts on a person's overall wellbeing.

Mental Health. People may suffer from various psychological problems that may affect their function such as stress, anxiety, depression, lack of motivation and helplessness (Beharu, 2018). These psychological problems affect the performance of students in university, leading to poor performance, worry and fear, low self-confidence, and test anxiety (Beharu, 2018). Life circumstances such as parental divorce, death, accidental injury, and disease can lead to the decline in student mental health and coping abilities (Mulisa, 2019). This may therefore ultimately lead to the poor academic performance of students (Mulisa, 2019). Additionally, education has become more and more competitive, where the desire for achievement has put immense pressure on students (Goni et al., 2015). Performance at school is related to the self-image of students (Goni et al., 2015). Students thus feel pressured to achieve outstanding academic results which consequently makes their studies

become a major stressor (Goni et al., 2015). In effort to attain academic success, students may even give up recreational activities which results in the absence of physical and mental relaxation (Goni et al., 2015). Goni et al. (2015) therefore highlights the need for educational institutions to provide students with the opportunity for regular physical and mental activities.

During the 1990s, academic support focused on students' social and psychological wellbeing (Boughey, 2010). Universities employed social workers and psychologists and created various academic support programmes such as mentoring (Boughey, 2010). This was aimed at allowing students to realise their potential as successful and productive individuals and these support programmes also focused on integrating students into the academic environment (Boughey, 2010). The university environment is therefore not only seen as a place for educational advancement, but it can also be seen as a resource for promoting the well-being of students (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). However, over the years, the mental health status of students in university has become alarming and is seen as an area of great concern. Over the years, the country has witnessed an increase in the number of suicidal cases amongst students in university (Kaminer & Shabalalala, 2019). Due to the country's state of mental health service provision and inadequate funding towards mental health services, students in higher education cannot afford private mental health services and therefore rely on university mental health facilities (Kaminer & Shabalalala, 2019). However, these services become strained with the influx of students needing mental health assistance, which results in long waiting lists and few services provided. This then poses a challenge, as it is in these conditions that student mental health escalates into more serious crises (Kaminer & Shabalalala, 2019). Therefore, mental health in higher education remains an issue of concern which is seen to hinder the successful completion of studies of students (Makoni, 2016).

Microsystem Factors Influencing Academic Success

The microsystem is described as "a complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g., home, school,

workplace)” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). This system is therefore the innermost social system consisting of the immediate setting (Mulisa, 2019). This social system represents the students’ everyday lives and the interactions experienced with others within this setting (Leonard, 2011). In the context of the postgraduate students and their campus environment, these interactions include the student-lecturer relations that affect students’ learning, the students’ relations with other students on campus and in lecture halls, their family structure and situations that affect their behaviour and educational outcomes, and their leisure activities that impact on their academic success. These abovementioned microsystem level elements are discussed below.

Home and Living Environment. Research on academic success describes the influence of the family context on a students’ academic performance (Perger & Takacs, 2016). According to Taylor and Gabre (2016), there are various studies that demonstrate a correlation between parenting style and student academic performance. Students who live in an authoritative parenting environment which is characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and firm control, are said to academically perform better than students from authoritarian and permissive parenting homes (Taylor & Gabre, 2016). Thus, students exhibit academic competence when their parents establish firm standards for behaviour, encourage emotional independence, and are involved in the student’s academic activities (Taylor & Gabre, 2016). Various studies provide evidence that supportive and secure personal attachments are strong determinants that individuals will be protected against adversity (Wang et al., 1993). According to Bonnie (1991) the quality of the immediate caregiving environment greatly influences a child’s outcomes.

According to Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011), a learner’s academic performance is dependent on their home environment. According to Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011):

The state of the home affects the individual since the parents are the first socializing agents in an individual’s life. This is because the family background and context of a child affect his reaction to life situations and his level of performance. (p. 256)

This positive correlation between the home environment and academic performance involves the student interaction with parents, the kinds of learning materials found in the home, and the involvement of extracurricular activities (McMillan & Reed, 1993). Thus, the home environment is an especially important determinant to a student's psychological, emotional, social, and economic wellbeing (Shahzadi & Ahmad, 2011). Mulisa (2019) also states that a family's economic background can have academic implications for students in higher education. Mulisa (2019) therefore states that students from a higher socio-economic status experience better adjustment to higher education and an increased level of academic performance.

In South Africa, the living conditions of students are important influencing factors in student success (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). The home environment is seen as a unique family structure specific to this context (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Amongst these unique circumstance's poverty, unemployment and HIV/AIDS grimly affect the well-being and economic standing of families (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). The extended family which can be seen as the indigenous family environment in Africa, can also be transcribed to the South African context due to the historical and systemic inequalities experienced. "Thus, when we speak of South African families, we talk not only of the nuclear family, but also of extended families, as well as caregivers and guardians" (Holborn & Eddy, 2011, p. 1). Further most children in this context are living with single mothers or reside in households where the caregivers are unemployed (Holborn & Eddy, 2011, 2011). Therefore, the extended family acts as a source for the socialisation and protection of students (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Families also often rely on the extended family to receive support, including social and financial assistance (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Various families further live with extended family members where caregiving is shared (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). It is therefore important that universities acknowledge and engage with the family system, especially the extended family system commonly witnessed amongst the disadvantaged student population, in order

to promote student achievement and to promote family involvement in students' academic experiences.

However, during the academic year, various students live in on-campus and off-campus student accommodation. Students leave their home environment and move to other cities in order to access higher education (Doygun & Gulec, 2012). Often, higher education institutions are located far from students' homes and transport is usually expensive to commute daily to university, therefore students often live in student accommodation on or near campus (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). This is particularly relevant to Black disadvantaged students whose home environments may be located within rural or semi-urban areas. These students are left with no choice but to leave their families in order to participate in their higher education studies. Studies show that living in accommodation can improve student retention of at-risk students and is linked to improved academic performance (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Data obtained at the University of Johannesburg demonstrates that students living in residence perform 5-6 percent better than those that do not live in residence (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). This is also due to the social integration and adaptability of students who live in student accommodation, to campus life (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Jones et al. (2008) states that living in residential accommodation made it easier for the Black disadvantaged students' part of REAP, to form friendships and participate in social and leisure activities than for those who stayed at home in the rural areas. However, due to the high demand for student accommodation, issues such as availability/access of student accommodation by those from a low socio-economic status, as well as familial economic status, and a lack of adequate funding for student accommodation, which hinder many students from acquiring student accommodation each year, further impacts on their academic performance and their attainment of academic success in higher education.

Belonging and Peer Relations. According to the SDT, the basic needs for emotional independence and relatedness predict a student's self-determination (Loh et al., 2021). According to Loh et al. (2021), relatedness refers to a student sense of belonging in

university. It is also explained as a student's level of connection with others (Deci and Ryan, 2000 as cited in Loh et al., 2021). Thus, through students interacting with each other, they are actively seeking out their inherent need to belong (Loh et al., 2021). Peer interaction therefore provides a context for social and academic adjustment (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Thus, a sense of belonging occurs when students are able to academically integrate within the university environment (Loh et al., 2021). Therefore, when a student feels as though they belong, they feel recognised and included within the academic environment (Moallem, 2013). The formation of friendship is also said to influence academic performance and self-esteem of students (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Those students who therefore have a deficit in social capital (the network of relationships among people) are more likely to fall behind academically and socially leading to increased non-academic engagements (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). Further, Pather (2015) found that the students who experienced a lack in connectedness in university, were also those who experienced financial hardships and family responsibilities (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). Within REAP, disadvantaged students expressed that when they came into university, they did not know anybody else unlike other students who had come from bigger towns or school near university and who had already some friends (Jones et al., 2008). Therefore, these conditions made it harder for students to adjust socially (Jones et al., 2008). Further, it is said that "students interact extensively with people from different ecological systems and their success depends on how well connected they feel towards different individuals in different contexts" (Loh et al., 2021, p. 91). Therefore, students' sense of belonging not only relates to their desire to be connected to peers and friends, however it also relates to students' feeling of connectedness to parents, and educators (Loh et al., 2021).

Student-Lecturer/Faculty Relationship. According to Mulisa (2019), caring teaching, a supportive mentor and a friendly relationship are associated with successful academic outcomes. In higher education, students may seek academic support from a number of institutional bodies such as lecturers, librarians, administrative staff, and tutors.

According to Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011), the student-lecturer/educator interaction is seen to influence a student's level of performance. Furthermore, Habley et al. (2010 as cited in Perger & Takacs, 2016), state that "academic advising, comprehensive learning assistance, programmes for first-generation students, early warning systems for at-risk students and extended freshmen orientation are among the practices which are important in student success" (p. 123). Taylor and Gebre (2016) maintain that at-risk students who face academic failure experience greater pleasure when they feel supported and acknowledged as compared to those students who do not experience support. Thus, activities such as advising, and consultation programs increase student involvement and yield positive outcomes (Shahzadi & Ahmad, 2011). Therefore, students who contact their faculty members seem to display increased student involvement and motivation (Shahzadi & Ahmad, 2011). Research further states that the interaction between faculty and student affects students' academic achievement (Perger & Takacs, 2016). This is due to its instrumental role of encouraging students to participate in projects, encouraging faculty caring (mentoring), creating, and promoting student self-confidence, and developing a student's self-concept, which in turn produces positive higher educational experiences for students (Perger & Takacs, 2016). Research, therefore, emphasises that friendly, encouraging supporting learning environment could improve a students' achievement motivation (Mulisa, 2019).

Although seeking academic support is a contributing factor in attaining academic success, students tend to express that their lack of engagement with academic staff in university being due to negative past experiences. In some instances, students feel ignored by their lecturers which affects their future behaviour in seeking out academic support (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). Therefore, instead of seeking academic assistance from academic staff, students rely on their friends and peers, perceiving the information they provide as valuable and trustworthy (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). Furthermore, according to Tinto's model, the lack of assimilation and integration into the university environment

influences the level of student dropout rates (Tinto, 1993). Therefore universities need to increase their focus and attention on academic support.

Extra-curricular Activities. Tinto (1993) asserts that students who successfully integrate into their social environment are seen through their level of involvement in extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities denote social activities which students participate in (Morris, 2019). It is shown that involvement in extracurricular activities at school is seen to provide protection for students (McMillan & Reed, 1993) and participating in campus sport and other social activities can assist with their adjustment to the higher education environment (Jones et al., 2008). Morris (2019) found that that extracurricular activities were positively associated to the academic attainment of students. Extracurricular activities that reward participation further gives students a sense of pride and accomplishment (Werner, 1997). Having a hobby, creative interests, and sports promote the growth of one's self-esteem through the success of a chosen activity (McMillan & Reed, 1993). Additionally, involvement in required helpfulness may also be a powerful factor for students. This may include community work, academic tutoring, or even helping at home (McMillan & Reed, 1993). All these activities create meaning and bring purpose to the difficult life of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and further increase their altruistic nature (McMillan & Reed, 1993). Thus, volunteer work helps these students to realise that there are also other people that need help. Therefore, extracurricular activities affect and influence student achievement. However, according to Jones et al. (2008) students who are socio-economically disadvantaged do not usually participate in social and leisure activities that their peers engage due to their unique academic demands. This presents as more of a challenge to disadvantaged students who often have to work harder and work for longer hours in order to succeed academically and overcome the obstacles presented to them, further impacting on their opportunities for social integration and academic integration (Jones et al., 2008). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds

therefore need to achieve a balance in order to succeed in their studies and to manage their newfound freedom to participate in extracurricular and social activities.

Mesosystem Factors Influencing Academic Success

The mesosystem “comprises the interrelations among major settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant” (Bronfenbrenner 1977, p. 515; Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 209). This system is the second innermost social ecology, and it encompasses all the processes and interconnections of the microsystem (Mulisa, 2019). In this research context, the postgraduate students interact with their home and academic environment and the interactions of these two microsystems can influence a student’s academic performance. The following factors are analysed below and are seen to have an effect on students’ experiences in higher education: family support, the relationship between family experiences and the postgraduate students’ university experiences, adjustment, friendship, and community support. There are various other factors that may be influential to students’ experiences, however the abovementioned influencers have been chosen due to their applicability to the postgraduate student population.

Family Support. According to McMillan and Reed (1993) parental commitment that provides support and informal counselling, helps children in achieving success (McMillan & Reed, 1993). When fostering positive characteristics for the perseverance and adaptation in children, family environments are required to be caring, hold high expectations for the child’s behaviour, have certain structure, and importantly encourage the participation of the child (Wang et al., 1993). Consequently, according to Creighton (2007), the lack of support and isolation of the family and parents, does not facilitate learning or bring about positive measures towards student success.

According to Taylor and Gabre (2016), parents’ involvement in their child’s educational activities, influences the child’s academic performance. Therefore, parental involvement is associated with higher academic achievement (Taylor & Gabre, 2016). However, due to historical inequality and the educational experiences of parents who

endured apartheid and Bantu education, the educational experiences of parents may not correlate with the educational experiences of students in higher education today. This may further relate to their post-secondary and higher education experiences. Research also states that the expectations imposed on a child by the parent, contribute to their academic progression (Ditton et al., 2018). Family support nonetheless appears to be an important attribute of successful low SES students as parents have higher expectations for their children's education, and the pressure exerted by them enable them to persist in achieving academic success (McMillan & Reed, 1993). Therefore, parental background and social class are important contributors in the education achievement of children (Perger & Takacs, 2016). Students that participated in REAP in South Africa, expressed how growing up in rural environments contributed to their lack of exposure to written or spoken English, a lack of resources such as books as there are no public libraries in rural areas, reduces resource access such as computers and televisions in the home. Most students were also the first to attend university in their family. All of these factors impacted on their competence in university (Jones et al., 2008). Therefore, many students do not have individuals within their family than can assist in their adjustment to the new university environment and who assist them with their academic studies (Jones et al., 2008). Although parents may be supportive, their limited understanding of higher education impacted their academic experiences (Jones et al., 2008). Further, Smitz-Sciborski (2011, as cited in Perger & Takacs, 2016), conducted a study of students who were admitted into university and were the first in their family to attend university. This study highlights how family background impacts on socio-economically disadvantaged students' university and experiences (Perger & Takacs, 2016). This study by Smitz-Sciborski (2011, as cited in Perger & Takacs, 2016) therefore conclude that the background of many socio-economically disadvantaged students does not afford them the same level of preparedness for higher education as their peers of a higher socio-economic status (Jones et al., 2008). Therefore, Taylor and Gabre (2016) assertion of the

importance of educators knowing the home environments of students in order to shape learning contexts, is especially critical within the South African context.

Adjustment. Research has commonly focused on the adjustment process of first year students and the support needed in transitioning from secondary education to higher education. Students entering the university environment in their first year, experience a number of adjustment challenges. These adjustment challenges include time management, autonomy, lack of preparedness for tutorials and university courses, adopting a new learning style, acquiring new skills, and generally manoeuvring in the university environment (Naong et al., 2009). However Black disadvantaged students experience unique adjustment challenges in the higher education environment. In REAP, disadvantaged students expressed of having experienced a range of challenges due to their struggle of adjusting to the strange new environment of higher education (Jones et al., 2008). They expressed experiencing feelings of social alienation, homesickness, isolation and over-felt the socio-cultural mismatch of having come from rural areas and coming into the university (Jones et al., 2008).

This difficulty in adjusting to the university environment is related to the countries educational system. With more than 20 years of democracy, the secondary education system should put through suitable students capable of embarking on their goals in higher education (Chetty & Pather, 2015). According to Mouton et al., (2013), this is due to the standardisation of Grade 12 school results. Therefore, According to Mouton et al. (2013):

Standardization of Grade 12 results is creating a barrier between original results and adjusted results and therefore is contributing to major discrepancies in the context of the reliability of the schooling system and the type of student envisaged for university studies. (p. 287)

According to Mdepa and Tshiwula (2019) “in order to pursue an inclusive diversity, South Africa has to pay attention to a quality foundation in its primary and secondary schooling as a pipeline for its higher education goals” (p. 30). The gap experienced between high school

and university is also due to the dysfunction and the interdependent nature of primary, secondary, and tertiary education (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Therefore a malfunction to one level creates a ripple effect onto other levels (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Due to the education inequalities experienced during apartheid, the aftereffects of lack of resources, inhibited knowledge and skills production has been evidenced across the entire education system (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Ramdass (2006) explains that the reason disadvantaged students experience difficulty adjusting to the university environment when entering higher education is because of the level of education experienced in disadvantaged secondary schools (Mouton et al., 2013). Further, according to Jones et al. (2008), these students come out of the schooling system and decide on their top two university course choices in arbitrary ways due to uncertainty pertaining to their career interests. Thus, career guidance is needed to adequately prepare students for transition of high school to university (Jones et al., 2008). The under-preparedness of these students could therefore impact their academic success and academic experiences in higher education.

Post-1994, higher education policies increased university access of students for all races. However, with this increased admittance of previously disadvantaged students, brought the emergence of various adjustment issues not previously experienced. Therefore, the education system was not fully prepared for the hidden challenges that were experienced by disadvantaged students (Chetty & Pather, 2003). Most of these Black students are the first in their family to attend university, therefore not having adequate familial support to assist them with their higher educational experiences (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). These students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds therefore lack the academic readiness of higher education and other various characteristics necessary for the successful adjustment to university (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Pather and Dorasamy (2018) also speak to students' misconstrued expectations of university and the skills required for academic studies and in managing their academic workload. In 2005, the Nation Plan for Higher Education expressed that the graduation rate was less than 22% for a three-year

bachelor's degree and highlighted challenges experienced in first year which affects student academic and social experience (Chetty & Pather, 2015).

In addition, the massification of higher education (increased access) has led to larger classes (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Due to the large classes, students who sit far away in the lecture hall cannot adequately hear and insufficient time is allocated to accommodate discussion and questions (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Large classes prevent lecturers from interacting with students at a personal level or impede on their understanding of student experiences and circumstances (Jones et al., 2008). The responses of disadvantaged students in large classes in higher education, is usually withdrawal (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Naong et al. (2009) asserts that students do not participate in lectures due to the fear of being viewed adversely. These disadvantaged students already experience low confidence due to language challenges which affects their participation in lectures, and they also have adapt to large classes not previously witnessed or experienced (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Similarly, students who attended secondary schools that had very small classroom sizes struggled to adjust to the large classes in university (Hlalele, 2015). Therefore, Pather and Dorasamy (2015) state that students' academic and social experiences influence their expectations of higher education and their expectations of academic performance.

Therefore, within this context, it is important to research and acknowledge the influence of students' educational backgrounds on their higher education experiences, as well as the vast discrepancies in academic preparedness between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. This implies that various pre-entry and non-academic factors influence academic success and academic achievement. Failure in adjusting to higher education can result in low attendance in lectures, poor academic preparation, the inability to balance one's social and academic life, engaging in drug and alcohol abuse, missing assessments, and poor concentration (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). However, universities may assist students by directing them to available support services that may assist them to adjust to the pace and experience of university (Lewin & Mawoyo,

2014). Therefore, there is a great need for South African universities to infuse adjustment issues into their curriculums so that students can be taught life skills that are directly connected to the academic experience in higher education (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Universities further need to employ multidimensional approach in understanding students' expectations and their actual experiences in higher education (Pather & Dorasamy, 2015).

Community Support. According to Werner (1997) young people place their trust on friends who are able to offer them emotional refuge. Being surrounded by other people may enable them to gain perspective on their emotional experiences and their academic experiences. (Werner, 1997). Students who feel that they are part of a community are encouraged to enhance their opportunity of attaining academic success, as opposed to those who feel isolated and alone (Jones et al., 2008). With South Africa, being a collectivist nation, most students in higher education achieve what others would deem as an act of empowering their community (Hlalela, 2015). Therefore, many of the students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, are encouraged to develop themselves and give back to the community (Jones et al., 2008). According to the National Education Association (NEA) (2021), when the various social systems work together to support and encourage student learning, students become more committed to their academic studies, their academic performance increases and this increases their ability to enrol into a higher education programme. Krovetz states that resilient communities are those that emphasise caring, purposeful support and exhibit high expectations (as cited in Dass-Brailsford, 2005). However, communities that are characterised by chronic stress and health problems, negatively affect students' adjustment and academic performance (Taylor & Gabre, 2016).

Further, fewer problems are seen to exist within communities that are social integrated (Wang et al.1993, as cited in Miller & Ohlin, 1985). One of the strongest signs of community support and cohesion, denotes to the accessibility of community organisations that provide for adequate avenues for improved development (Garmezy, 1991). "Health care organizations, childcare services, job training opportunities, religious institutions, and

recreational facilities are only some of the various social organisations that serve human needs” (Wang et al., 1993, p. 14).

Exosystem Factors Influencing Academic Success

The exosystem “is an extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Although within this social system, the student is not actively involved, this setting directly or indirectly effects students (Loh et al., 2021). The exosystem level elements that may affect the postgraduate students are discussed below and include but not limited to: Wits university policies, funding, and government policies.

Higher Education Policy and Politics in South Africa. Bourdieu (1977, as cited in Mzangwa, 2019) states that socio-economic status is one of the primary causes of the disparities seen in education. Therefore, the social and political context of a country greatly influences whether a student attends or does not attend university (Mzangwa, 2019). However, Mzangwa (2019) also asserts that most of the students in South Africa that cannot attend higher education due their social class background, are those coming from the lower class status. Therefore, the education system is overstretched in their efforts to provide quality education and access (Mouton et al., 2013). According to Chetty and Pather (2015):

Higher education in this country remains in flux as institutions of higher learning have to recalibrate their practice to meet the aims of social, financial, and political equity to which the government is committed. Inevitable fluctuations of a structural nature are the outward proof of the hardship of adjusting centuries-old establishments of colonial or apartheid authority to a new model of democratic fluency. (p. 2)

Therefore, higher education institutions are confronted with the increased commitment needed in addressing the aftereffects of historical inequality witnessed in higher education (Mouton et al., 2013). This is done through policy implementation to redress inequalities amongst disadvantaged groups and to avoid further discrimination (Mzangwa, 2019).

The goal of the Higher Education Act (1997) was to increase the access into university of socio-economically disadvantaged students (Mouton et al., 2013). In South Africa, universities are governed by councils and management, being the vice chancellor and their rectorate, which run the universities and their daily operations (Mouton et al., 2013). At times, the higher educational structures find themselves in conflict concerning university policy and operations. However, many higher education institutions also have amended their admissions policies in order to rectify inequalities caused by the apartheid education system (Mouton et al., 2013). In 2002, the then Minister of Higher Education implemented a reformed education policy decision (Mzangwa, 2019). This policy decision was intended to redress racial imbalances, however it neglected other pivotal factors affecting higher education such as access, the issue of language and participation and equity in its fullest sense. The White Paper on Education (2013) emphasises the role of universities as being responsible for social justice, in creating equitable conditions and in reversing the damaging effects of apartheid (Chetty & Pather, 2015). In spite of the policy transformation witnessed over the years in higher education, issues of race and social class in higher education are still in the forefront of dialogues (Mzangwa, 2019). Therefore, the task left to government, is to how to implement educational reform in order to fully accommodate and broaden access for previously disadvantaged students (Mzangwa, 2019).

The policies on transformation in higher education remain good initiatives. However, they are not yielding the expected developments (Mzangwa, 2019). Therefore, although progress has been made in the implementation of policies to redress the consequences of the past, the reality Black disadvantaged students face in higher education, is still far from ideal (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Therefore, vision for a fair and equal education for all has remained of considerable importance to the education system and in the various policy documents implemented (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Therefore, “even after two decades of democracy, the hostility and conflict on how higher education institutions operate and how are these institutions managed is still rife” (Mzangwa, 2019, p. 11). Higher education is only

one facet of the education value chain and various challenges still exist in providing students with quality and equitable education (Chetty & Pather, 2015).

Cost of Higher Education and Funding Issues. Higher education funding is a major challenge in South Africa, most felt by historically disadvantaged students. Though the cost of higher education may be lower than that of Europe and North America, many students in the country cannot afford higher education as the cost is still far above the average South African household income (Tjønneland, 2017). Therefore, a number of South African students in university do not have adequate financial support. Thus, the importance to access higher education is marred by the increased need for funding in order to engage in higher education (McKay, Naidoo & Simpson, 2018). However, the number of students who require funding and the funds available do not correspond and leave many students without funding.

The South African government's aim to increase participation of socio-economically disadvantaged students into higher education, brought about the establishment of the National Student Financial Scheme (NSFAS) (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). NSFAS is an entity which falls under the Department of Higher Education and Training (NSFAS, 2021). According to the NSFAS (2021), they provide financial support to disadvantaged students who wish to study in public universities (NSFAS, 2021). They therefore afford formerly excluded students the opportunity to enter higher education (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Applicants who qualify for NSFAS are those students who have a household income of R350 000 or less, per annum (NSFAS, 2021). Although NSFAS costs go up to R1.1 billion each year, the demand for funding proves these high figures to be insufficient (McKay et al., 2018). This loan scheme may be acclaimed by other developing countries, but it only provides financial assistance to a minority of those students in desperate needs of funding (Tjønneland, 2017). For students who do not succeed in obtaining NSFAS or for students who obtain the funding and experience funding shortfalls, the onus remains either on higher education institutions of the students to acquire alternative funding (McKay et al., 2018).

Therefore, students seek out for opportunities to acquire money/funding through grants, bursaries, loans and even search for job opportunities to manage their financial burdens. Some students depend on their parent's financial support to supplement what they obtain from NSFAS (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Other students may acquire funding in order to pay for their tuition fees, however they may lack additional funds to obtain study resources (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014) or other basic living expenses such as food, transport, or even toiletries. Therefore, some students need support for fees whilst other need support for learning materials and living cost (Butler-Adam, 2016). Further, excluded students who do not receive funding from NSFAS are those students that fall within the 'missing middle'. These students are those in the middle class with a household income of between R120 000 and R600 000 (Tjønneland, 2017). Therefore, demonstrating that higher education has become unaffordable for low-income families and to those students in the missing middle, who are too 'wealthy' to qualify for NSFAS funding and too poor to afford their tertiary education (Ndaba, 2017). In addition, in the beginning years of 2000, the state student debt sat at R5.5 billion and university institutions therefore pursued cost recovery strategies such as upfront payment and the withholding of academic results, in order to reduce the student debt incurred (McKay et al., 2018). Students who could not afford their fees, therefore found themselves financially excluded due to their failure to meet payment deadlines (Hlalela, 2015). This resulted in the national student revolt known as the #FeesMustFall movement, where students protested and expressed their grievances on the cost of higher education (McKay et al., 2018).

The #FeesMustFall movement began in 2015 when students at various campuses embarked on a national student protest against the tuition fee hike of 11.5%, that was announced by the Department of Higher Education (DHET) (Ndaba, 2017). The #FeesMustFall movement was also fuelled by President Jacob Zuma's announcement in October 2015 of a 0% fee increase for 2015 in attempts to demonstrate government's understanding of the financial difficulties experienced by students (Butler-Adam, 2016). The

#FeesMustFall movement did not only raise awareness to the exorbitant cost of higher education, however it brought to light student concerns transformation failure, politics of knowledge, the neo-liberalisation of university and institutional racism (Ndaba, 2017). Overall, the movement demanded free and equal education. It demanded free-quality-decolonised higher education (Ndaba, 2017). According to Ndaba (2017), “the concerns raised by the #FeesMustFall and other student movements cannot be divorced from the success crisis by Black students at South African universities” (p. 8). This movement therefore highlighted the cost of education as a key barrier in accessing higher education (Public Servants Association, 2016).

Protests and public demonstrations have been a shadow of South African politics and the extreme inequalities experienced (Tjønneland, 2017). According to Tjønneland, (2017), the increased nature of student protests are manifestations of the failure of higher education institutions in transforming South African education. The Public Servants Association (2016) asserts that “South African universities run on a mixed system, in which government heavily subsidises university budgets, while still expecting universities to make up the shortfall with tuition fees, which are themselves supported through access programmes like NSFAS” (Public Servants Association, 2016, p. 9). Furthermore, the financial exclusion experienced by various students on their failure to meet tuition payment deadlines, further leads to student protest each year by the Student Representative Council (SRC) of various universities in the country, the most recent occurring in March 2021. The Wits SRC embarked on a protest in March of 2021 due to the same dynamic that has led students protests since the #FeesMustFall movement. The Wits SRC demanded free education, amongst many other concerns: the clearance of debt, immediate provision of postgraduate funding, first years to be granted allowance to register whilst resolving the funding crisis, and a full return of the academic programme on campus under level one lockdown (Lindeque, 2021). The South African Union of Students (SAUS) further threatened government of a national shutdown of all higher education institutions if they did not meet

their demands (Lindeque, 2021). The Wits SRC President Mpendulo Mfeka further expressed that they would take legal action and file an application to the Constitutional Court demanding free, decolonised education (Lindeque, 2021). Sadly, during these protests Mthokozisi Ntumba was killed in Braamfontein as he was shot by the police during the Wits student protest (Simelane, 2021). Mfeka asserted to Eyewitness News (EWN) that “his death was unfortunate, and it speaks largely to the police brutality in our country right now. The violence on people who are protesting or trying to make their demands heard by either the government or any sector of society is an alarming one” (Lindeque, 2021). Various other students were shot by members of the South African Police Service during these protests. Soon thereafter on the 11th of March, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr. Blade Nzimande announced measures to address the funding shortfall to support first year students and institutions (NSFAS, 2021). NSFAS also announced amended funding eligibility decisions for students (NSFAS, 2021).

However, the University of the Witwatersrand is assisting students financially through various avenues such as through their student bodies, organisations, initiatives, and institutional structures. One of these is the Financial Aid and Scholarships Office (FASO). This office provides funds to undergraduate and postgraduate students on behalf of donors (University of the Witwatersrand, 2020). The hardship fund was created in response to the University recognising that a great number of students need financial assistance and accommodation fees due to socio-economic circumstances (University of the Witwatersrand, 2020). This funding is given to students who meet the criteria for academic achievement or a criterion that is discipline specific. The university also provides funding through the Postgraduate Merit Award (PMA) in order to assist graduates to complete their postgraduate studies (University of the Witwatersrand, 2020). No application is required for the Postgraduate Merit Award (University of the Witwatersrand, 2020). Further according to University of the Witwatersrand (2021) not all courses are funded by the award. However, those students that receive funding, do so based on their academic performance (University

of the Witwatersrand, 2020). Students who are awarded funding further receive a stipend each academic year and also have to fulfil duties within their schools (University of the Witwatersrand, 2020). The university further at times provides job opportunities for students to gain income whilst studying. Therefore, although the institution experiences an immense funding crisis, it demonstrates an awareness to student financial issues and further provides opportunities for funding.

The high cost of education in South Africa is therefore often borne by parents, students and through sourcing student loan facilities and structures (Public Servants Association, 2016). Socio-economically disadvantaged students face the challenge of worrying about how they will pay for fees (Hlalela, 2015), therefore highlighting funding as a unique barrier in students in South Africa accessing higher education. The government may not have the adequate financial resources to eradicate fees and there is no easy solution for the funding crisis in higher education institutions. However, taking into consideration the high unemployment figure with nearly half of the population being unemployed, NSFAS and other funding models and initiatives need to expand and improve (Butler-Adam, 2016). “Access to higher education – to any level of education, of course – is critical and affordability is too, because access without affordability has no meaning” (Butler-Adam, 2016, p. 1).

Macrosystem Factors Influencing Academic Success

The macrosystem “refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exosystems are the concrete manifestations” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). This social system involves the broader culture and ideological beliefs, societal values, and political trends that influence on a person’s development (Mulisa, 2019). The various macrosystem level elements that impact student achievement and affect students’ effectiveness include socio-economic status, cultural values, technological backgrounds, curricula, and political systems (Mulisa, 2019). The primary macrosystem influence discussed below is socio-economic status. The political system which may fall within the

macrosystem is discussed in the chronosystem due to the significant levels of change experienced within the macrosystem.

Socio-economic Status. Socio-economic stress has the ability to threaten children's growth and development (Dass-brailsford, 2005). Those children who are placed at-risk, are those who are born under conditions of deep-rooted socio-economic disadvantage (Dass-brailsford, 2005). Socio-economic status refers to "the relative position of a family or individual in a hierarchal social structure, based on their access to or control over wealth, privilege and power" (Maphosa & Tanga, 2018, p. 35). When looking at the influence of one's social background on their educational success, research focus on structural inequality which affects academic achievement, and differences in choice of pathways within the educational system (Ditton et al., 2018).

A primary circumstance within the macrosystem which affects students, and their families is the socio-economic status. The degree to which families have the availability of financial and material resources determines how well they function (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Families that have unmet needs, experience pressure, have debt and are economically affected, struggle to function (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Furthermore, parents who experience economic hardship are more emotionally distressed and interact poorly with their families, affecting their parenting and students emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Research also shows that socio-economically disadvantaged experience lower academic performance (Mulisa, 2019).

Statistics demonstrate that South Africa has one of the highest GINI co-efficient in the world (Leibowits & Bozalek, 2014 as cited in Ndaba, 2017). According to Arnold (2014), GINI co-efficient is "a measure of the degree of inequality in income distribution" within a country (p. 750). The inequality experienced is of direct result of the patterns of the apartheid era, with Africans still remaining the poorest in the country (Leibowits & Bozalek, 2014). Although the country is years into its democracy, the distribution of wealth is still skewed against Black people affirming the high levels of unemployment and poverty witnessed

(Dass-brailsford, 2005). Therefore, children who grow up in this climate are exposed on a daily basis to a variety of these psychosocial risks (Dass-brailsford, 2005). Therefore, demonstrating the deep imprints of race and socio-economic status in South Africa. Within the context of higher education, the social factors that influence access include socio-economic status, race, and schooling background (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Therefore, socio-economically disadvantaged students experienced increased levels of stress and pressure due to factors such as fees, fitting in and belonging, adjustment issues, lack of resources such as textbooks and laptops, and other various challenges experienced in higher education. According to Stephen et al. (2004), socio-economically disadvantaged students have a higher likelihood of dropping out or failing. Therefore, socio-economic background is seen to impact on students' attainment of academic success (Mouton et al., 2013). Thus, socio-economic status and other macrosystem elements should be considered by universities in their analysis of student experiences, especially those coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Chronosystem Factors Influencing Academic Success

According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), the chronosystem is “the influence on a person's developmental changes (and continues) overtime in the environments in which the person is living” (p. 40). This system is therefore subject to change as it is situated in time (Leonard, 2011). This system also emphasises the life transition of the developing person (Mulisa, 2019). The considerations discussed below include socio-historical circumstances and changes in higher education in South Africa.

Socio-historical Changes in South Africa. In 1948, the Nation Party introduced the doctrine of apartheid. This doctrine included a highly unequal social, economic, and political system of discrimination and segregation, based on race (Fiske & Ladd, 2004). Therefore, apartheid amplified the gap between the White minority and the Black majority.

Furthermore, ‘township’ residential areas in South Africa originate from the offshoots of apartheid. During those times, low-cost housing which was near the towns and cities was

reserved for Black workers in order to be closer to their places of employment (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011). Today these 'townships' are mostly characterised by unfavourable conditions of poverty, crime, and violence (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011). Hence in South Africa, there are portions of extreme wealth and a substantial middle class, but the majority of the population in the country are very poor (Brier, 2010). Therefore, poverty is still today the mirror of racial discrimination experienced during apartheid (Brier, 2010). Also, as seen above, African people during apartheid had the worst quality and low finance education system (Brier, 2010). Many years later, the effects are still evident.

Education in the country was also influenced by the policy of apartheid, as the government "intensified its control of the educational system" (Thompson, 2014, p. 195). Under the apartheid system, White students relished in good quality education and also enjoyed a great number of employment opportunities as opposed to Black students (Ndaba, 2015). In 1951, the nationalist government, through parliament, passed the Bantu Education Act, which allowed the nationalist government to control all aspects of education for Black people (Ndaba, 2015). Education thus became an instrument for the ideological domination (which complemented the more brutal instruments of domination – the police service) (Nkomo & Swartz, 2006). The Bantu Education system allowed the government to halt all other educational programs and exclude Black people from participating in the economy (Fiske & Ladd, 2004). This was all done to further support their policy and their aim of marginalising Black people in the country. This education policy by the government further segregated the education of African people from that of White, Coloured, and Indian people. They spent more on White students including providing them with excellent teaching facilities, whilst Black children had sub-standard facilities (Thompson, 2014). Further, the majority of Black teachers were significantly less skilled and qualified than White teachers (Thompson, 2014).

Higher education was not immune to apartheid legislation. In 1959, parliament passed an Act which barred universities from accepting Black students (Thompson, 2014)

such as unavailability of a course at a Black tertiary institution (Reddy, 2004). “By 1978, nearly 150 000 students were enrolled in universities in South Africa, 80 percent of them White” (Thompson, 2014, p. 197). In the 1980’s apartheid’s control began to decrease due to resistance and pressure exerted internationally (Ndaba, 2015). “Around the mid-1990s, South Africa’s first democratic government adopted a series of higher education policy reforms that significantly altered the terrain of higher education provision” (Nkomo & Swartz, 2006, p. 2). As a result, government amended its education policies in 1991 and education for Black people began to improve (Ndaba, 2015). These amendments further allowed some Black students to enrol into White schools (Ndaba, 2015).

In 1994, apartheid was abolished. “Abolition of racial restrictions on access after 1994 meant, in effect, an ‘opening up’ of the market for students – a move that led to larger numbers of Black, particularly Black middle-class students, drifting to formerly white institutions” (Nkomo & Swartz, 2006, p. 2). Meaning that access was to be broadened to a wider social groups and class (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). The Education White Paper 3 put forward transformative policies and principles that were needed to eradicate discrimination and readdress inequalities of the past that were still present in the educational system (Department of Education [DOE], 1997). This new educational system was thus more diverse and ensured that the quality and quantity of education and training was improved (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018).

Changes in Higher Education in South Africa. When students are accepted to study at university, an assumption is made – that these students are capable and able to complete the courses, in which they are enrolled in (Fraser & Killen, 2003). However, this poses a problem as in this context one cannot assume that once a student is admitted, that they will be able to achieve and attain success in their course modules at university (Fraser & Killen, 2003). This is due to systemic and historic inequalities experienced by Black people that consequently influence student achievement and performance in higher education. Therefore, within this context, a student’s successful completion and pass in the

matriculation exam, does not guarantee that a student will meet the requirements to graduate in higher education (Fraser & Killen, 2003).

In 1953, the Bantu Education Act was applied which classified and separated education along racial lines (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). The apartheid government further institutionalised higher education and also structured them along racial lines in relation to admission and tuition (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Therefore, “during the apartheid period, the higher education sector was predicted on the persistence of inequality and characterised by highly fragmented, incoherent and uncoordinated policy and planning” (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012, p. 21). Therefore Black, Coloured, and Indian students were not allowed to enter or pursue their academic studies in White universities (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). After the democratic election in 1994, new educational policies were introduced to rectify the disparities witnessed in universities (Tanga & Maphosa, 2018). These policies outlined radical transformation of all South African universities (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). They also focused on the increased admittance of Black students into university (Tanga & Maphosa, 2018). These post-apartheid strategies directed attention to the equitable representation of previously disadvantaged students, which is also reflected in the higher education policies (Brier, 2010). Therefore, the broadening of university access to first year students from various schools, has led to access to a large number of previously disadvantaged students entering university (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). Student enrolment increased where 40% of the student population was African and 52% was Black (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). In 2008, Black student enrolment represented more than half of all student enrolments (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). However, these students entered university from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds (Chetty & Pather, 2015). However, the problem does not stem from students but rather the problem stems from historical inequality (Carrim & Wangenge–Ouma, 2012). The socio-economically disadvantaged students now entering university with various challenges due to the inequality experienced in the past (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Therefore, the students entering universities in South Africa come from various upbringings and thus

enter university with differing life experiences, academic needs, and academic potentials (Fraser & Killen, 2003).

Research demonstrates that the initiatives (post-1994) that were aimed at widening access, focused on increasing enrolment into university and neglected focus on the academic success of students (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2008; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Smit, 2012). During the 1980s, the South African government passed the University Amendment Act to regulate the number of Black students that entered higher education institutions (Boughey, 2010). However, higher education institutions maintained their premise to admit students in accordance with students' academic performance (Boughey, 2010). Therefore, Academic Development (AD) was established in universities as a response to the unique needs of students entering university (Boughey, 2010). At this time, these White liberal universities had begun to admit few Black students due to the amended apartheid policies (Boughey, 2010). The AD program concentrated on academically supporting Black students and focusing on students' academic development as well as broader institutional development (Boughey, 2010). These intentions were directed at identifying students with the potential to academically succeed despite their disadvantaged backgrounds (Boughey, 2010). These intentions also focused on these students' lack of skills, the gap experienced in areas of knowledge and critical thinking, as well as the need for language development (Boughey, 2010). These areas of development were to be addressed by these students attending additional classes and tutorials (Boughey, 2010). Therefore, this program and other policies, were aimed at assisting underprepared socio-economically disadvantaged students at university (Tanga & Maphosa, 2018). However, Tanga and Maphosa (2018), state that this objective has not been achieved. According to Tanga and Maphosa (2018), "making higher education more inclusive requires not only moving historically underrepresented groups into higher education, but also meeting their unique needs" (p. 35). Vilakazi and Tema (1985, as cited in Boughey, 2010) further emphasise that it is not the

students who needed development, but the universities themselves had to adjust and assimilate to the changing student body.

Though, still years after this program and further initiatives, the success and graduation rates among Black students from disadvantaged backgrounds are dismal, and the dropout rates are high (Ndaba, 2017). Therefore, although there was an increased number of Black people attending higher education post 1994, graduation rates of Black students remain low (Brier, 2010). According to Tinto (1975), there are a few reasons why students drop out or withdraw from tertiary institutions. This may include their lack of assimilation into social and academic systems within higher education, and their lack of goal attainment (level of commitment possessed in attaining a higher education degree (Tinto, 1975). Hupfeld (2010), further attributes student drop out to demographic factors (such as low family income, single parent families and lack of language ability), students who are disengaged in school, students who assume adult roles and students who struggled academically. According to Strydom et al. (2010), the highest dropout rate in South Africa is during students' first year at university, and that Black students make up the majority of these rates. These students drop out due to a number of reasons that relate to maladjustment, social circumstances, health, finances, and poor programme choice (Chetty & Pather, 2015). When students enter university from high school, they are not adequately prepared to cope with the academic syllabus in university (Carrim & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). Several of the tests administered on students (both local and international tests) point to the fact that South African students are below the estimated average performance (Carrim & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012), such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IAEEA) which revealed that almost 68% of students failed to meet the international benchmark (Tanga & Maphosa, 2018). The Council for Higher Education (CHE) reported that in 2010, that Black student graduation sat at 16%, whilst the graduation rate of White students was 22% (Higher Education South Africa (HESA), 2014). It also stated that 59% of Black students dropped out of university compared to the dropout rate of

White students which sat at 35% (Higher Education South Africa, 2014). Therefore, the greater aim of increasing access to disadvantaged Black students and improving their academic achievement post-1994, currently seems to still be an area of focus. However, Killen (1994) mentions that there are certain factors that contribute to the attainment of academic success of students. Though these factors may indicate the success of a students, within the context of South Africa these factors may differ. Context is said to impact on the conceptualisation of academic success amongst students (Tanga & Maphosa, 2018). Therefore, given the country's historical history, a holistic approach is needed in analysing the factors that contribute to academic success.

Conclusion

These abovementioned social systems found in the ecological systems theory are important in understanding the socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students' higher education experiences in attaining academic success. This ecological framework demonstrates that these students' academic success is not only attributed to their ability but highlights the multidirectional relationships and interactions of these students with their social systems in holistically understanding their unique higher education experiences. Therefore, it is only through determining the personal and environmental factors that influence the attainment of academic success, that universities and scholars are able to better plan toward preventative measure and interventions that are focused on enhancing students' personal and environmental experiences. Also shown in the literature reviewed, is the vast amount of research conducted on disadvantaged students within their undergraduate studies in higher education.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Method

This chapter details the research design and research method used to address the research study's main aims. This study seeks to analyse the experiences that influence academic success amongst socio-economically disadvantaged Humanities postgraduate students at the University of Witwatersrand. The qualitative research design was employed to answer the research questions and to expand on the chosen research methodology. This study drew from phenomenological strategies in exploring the postgraduate students' experiences of higher education. Included in this chapter are the research design, sample selection, the method of data collection, method of data analysis, data rigour, reflexivity, and the ethical considerations.

Research Design

The strategy that a study employs in order to answer the research question is referred to as the research design (Polit & Beck, 2008). Thus, it provides a link to the data collected and the method used in answering the initial question being researched (Yin, 1994). The objective of this research study is to understand how socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students were able to attain academic success and thus the research question was: What are the experiences that contribute to the academic success of disadvantaged postgraduate students at the University of Witwatersrand, studying in the field of Humanities? With the awareness of this research question, a qualitative research design was employed in order to explore the main themes and aims of this study. According to Gravetter and Forzano (2015), a qualitative research design is "based on making observations that are summarised and interpreted in a narrative report" (p. 26). Auerbach (2003) expands on the significance of a qualitative research design by explaining that is a valued approach in the exploratory studies as it relies on the participants' perspectives. This exploratory approach was therefore chosen as it focuses on uncovering answers to questions, processes, and relationships (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This employed research design further allowed for the successful analysis of students in their higher

education studies and it further looked at the meaning and significance attached to their unique experiences.

A paradigm is described as “a set of overarching and interconnected assumptions about the nature of reality” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 4). It validates the actions of the researcher and it supports the approach that has been used for the research study. Based on Oiler’s (1981) descriptions, this research study had been identified to align with the interpretive phenomenological paradigm. This paradigm seeks to understand and explain people’s lived experiences. It therefore embraces a holistic approach and finds value in the individual context (Oiler, 1981). This paradigm therefore emphasises how “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Therefore, this study employed this paradigm as it asserts that students are the authors of their worlds and define their own realities. This study also asserts and acknowledges student’s influence in controlling their academic worlds and experiences.

Research Participants

A research population, according to Gravetter and Forzano (2015) is “the set of individuals of interest to a researcher” (p. 134). The students who participated in this research study were selected using the sampling method of purposive sampling. This method of sampling “enables you to use your judgment to select cases which will best enable you to answer your research question and your objectives” (Saunders et al., 1997, p. 124). This method was employed as students were selected based on those who best informed the research aims and research question, and those that enhanced the understanding of academic achievement amongst socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students. This enabled the researcher to select information rich participants who demonstrated that they have been able to attain academic success.

The researcher chose to focus the study on postgraduate students in the Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand. This decision was made as these students are readily available to the researcher, as the researcher is completing training at the same university

and campus as the selected postgraduate students. The decision to select postgraduate students was made with the assumption that individuals completing a postgraduate degree have attained academic success by virtue of being accepted into the postgraduate program and through them completing their postgraduate studies.

Upon choosing the students who would participate in this study, the researcher had to consider three main phases. In the *first phase*, the researcher invited postgraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds, studying within the Humanities, to participate in this study. Activities conducted within the study included, for example, inviting students to participate in the study through flyers, which were placed in Umthombo Building. The researcher also went to the Wits feeding scheme to request participation of postgraduate students. The researcher was in search of specific characteristics that made certain students appropriate and eligible for this study, and they were:

- Geographical location or living environment (e.g., township areas)
- Postgraduate students on NSFAS,
- Postgraduate students who were funding their studies through grants, loans, bursaries, or scholarships,

- Postgraduate students who were recipients of the Wits

Discretionary/Hardship Fund

- Postgraduate students who did not receive any funding,
- Postgraduate students living in residences (on and off campus),
- Postgraduate students who are beneficiaries of the Wits Food Programme (e.g., the Wits Feeding Scheme).

The demographic information presented below was acquired from the 11 participants who participated in the research study.

Interviewees (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Current Degree/Course	Residential Area	Family Structure	Funding
Lerato	Female	Master of Arts in Sociology	Windsor East, Randburg	Mother and Father	Loan, Discretionary Fund, and Crowd Fund
Themba	Male	Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology	North West	Grandparents, Mother and Father	Family, Discretionary Fund, and No Current Funding
Sipho	Male	Master of Arts in Sociology	Free State	Mother and Siblings	NSFAS and No Current Funding
Thapelo	Male	Master of Arts in African Studies	Pretoria	Mother and Sibling	NSFAS, Study Trust, Department of Arts and Culture, and No Current Funding
Musa	Male	Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology	Daveyton	Mother and Siblings	NFSAS, PMA and No Current Funding

Mbali	Female	Bachelor of Arts Honours in Psychology	Protea North, Soweto	Grandparents, Aunt and Nephew	NSFAS and PMA
Thandi	Female	Bachelor of Arts Honours in Psychology	Roodepoort	Mother, Father, Siblings and Son	NSFAS and PMA
Ndumiso	Male	Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)	New Castle, KwaZulu Natal	Grandmother, Mother, Siblings and Nieces	NSFAS and Loan
Mary	Female	Bachelor of Arts in Social Work (Fourth Year)	Mondeor	Mother, Father and Siblings	Bursary and NSFAS
Busi	Female	Bachelor of Arts Honours in Psychology	Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape	Stepmother, Siblings, and Uncles	Trust, NSFAS and PMA
Reneilwe	Female	Bachelor of Arts Honours in African Literature	King Williams Town, Eastern Cape	Mother, Father and Sibling	NSFAS, Loan and PMA

Method and Data Collection

The purpose of a research methodology is to elaborate on the processes, techniques and measures employed in order to answer the study's research question and main aims (Brink et al., 2013). The collection of data is therefore an important feature as it brings together information that links and is relevant to the research question posed (Burns &

Grove, 2005). The two methods in which qualitative data is usually collected is either through interviews or questionnaires (Malbon, 1999). This research study employed semi-structured one-hour interviews as the method of data collection, in order to examine the subjective views of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted fully understanding the subjective experiences of the students. These interviews therefore allowed for the in-depth exploration of their subjective views, beliefs, and experiences (Gill et al., 2008). Thus, this study attempts to increase understanding into the experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding their academic journey and success. According to Malbon (1999), semi-structured interviews allow for such inquiry as they the “questions reflect the concerns of the researcher” and they “value the point of view of the interviewee” (p. 315). They further allow for departure from the schedule that is being used and open way for the researcher to probe further based on the participants replies (Malbon, 1999). Thus, the interview is guided by the information the participants share.

The participant group that was chosen using purposive sampling, consisted of eleven postgraduate student participants. The semi-structured interviews, which lasted one hour, allowed the researcher to engage with the students and gain a deeper understanding into their experiences. Consent forms were signed preceding the interview and an information letter was given to all students to inform them of the research aim, their responsibility, and their rights as participants. The interview was guided by a predetermined schedule of questions. The questions were assembled according to the different themes that related to academic success, specifically taken into consideration socio-economic status, family background, educational background, attitudes towards tertiary education and socio-cultural factors. Not all interviews were the same as each interview differed in terms of wording or the order of questioning. This allowed for further probing and inquiry into areas/themes that were not stated in the interview schedule. The researcher further made use of notes during the interview to further add on information and to ensure accuracy. However, the interviews

were audio-recorded to assist in the accuracy and transcription of data. During the interviews, the researcher also explained the information provided would be analysed in an ethical manner and would further be reported anonymously.

Due to the global outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic that emerged in 2020, and the national lockdown that was introduced in South Africa in March 2020, the method in which the interviews were conducted were altered. The researcher thus conducted a number of interviews virtually, on the Zoom platform, and telephonically, using WhatsApp audio call. This change and adaptation in method was applied in order to successfully interview all the participants of the study whilst adhering to the national lockdown regulations.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data involved the transcription of all interviews to obtain the data from the interviews. The transcription of data was conducted by the researcher. Further through the data analysis process, the repeated play back of audio-recordings whilst corresponding with the typed transcripts was applied in order to ensure that each transcript was a true reflection of the interview. Any identifying information was changed to protect the identity of the participants. Therefore the researcher employed the use of pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

The analysis of the data obtained was analysed using the data method analysis of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This form of analysis seeks to examine and explore the perceptions of the participants in a study (Mole et al., 2021). The aim here is to attempt to make sense of the information provided instead of measuring its frequency (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Therefore, an in-depth interpretive account is given of a small number of participants instead of a generalised account of a large sample (Mole et al., 2021). Smith and Osborn (2007) provide a step-by-step presentation of interpretative phenomenological analysis, which was used in this study.

The first stage of analysis begins with looking for themes. It was within this stage that transcripts were vigorously read whilst taking notes of anything that stood out as interesting

or significant to the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The re-reading of transcripts was crucial to ensure the researcher became familiar with the content of the transcripts and to take note of any new insights that emerged (Smith & Osborn, 2007). At this stage, the researcher did not omit any data presented in passages but treated all information as data. However, it is also within this stage that the researcher began making comments in an attempt to summarise the information presented in order to find terms that inform theoretical connections made across cases (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The second stage of analysis consisted of connecting the themes. The emerging themes seen in the first step were listed down on a piece of paper, so as to analyse the connections between them (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Then the researcher attempted to make sense of the connections between the emerging themes. It was also important during this stage, that the researcher constantly checked that the connection made are in line with the information presented in transcripts. This ensured that there was continual and rigorous interaction between the researcher and the text (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The next stage consisted of presenting these themes, in an orderly manner on a table (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Therefore, the groups that were identified in the above step were given a name and represented as a superior theme (Smith & Osborn, 2007). During this stage it was also helpful for the researcher to assign and remember key words in order to easily find cases in particular transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2007). It is also during this phase that certain themes that did not fit with the emerging structure, were dropped (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The next step consisted of the researcher continuing with the analysis of other cases presented in all the interview transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The researcher therefore used the themes that were taken from first interpretation to continue the analysis of other texts (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This process demanded organisations and order on the part of the researcher in order not to repeat patterns or themes (Smith & Osborn, 2007). A table was then formed of all the themes derived from the examined transcripts (Smith & Osborn,

2007). The researcher then had to decide on which themes to include and focus on, and which to leave out (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The last stage consists of the write-up. The researcher wrote all statements that outline the significant meanings of the participants' experiences' (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In this way, the researcher translated the themes that emerged in the form of narrative account (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The researcher further expanded and explained these themes presented, however it was important that the researcher was cautious in stating and differentiating what the participants said and their interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Rigour

Reliability and validity in research findings are important (Brink et al., 2012).

Reliability refers to the researcher's ability to consistently and accurately collect and record the research data (Brink et al., 2012). Validity thus focuses on the truthfulness and the accuracy of the findings by the researcher (Brink et al., 2012). In qualitative studies, the analysis of the quality of the study is analysed through the understanding of the research study (Van Vuuren, 2014). Patton (1990) asserts that the integrity of a research study is seen through the researcher's sensitivity with the data obtain. This was done through checking that the methods of data analysis accurately represent the subjective experiences of the participants. For this study to be trustworthy, readers of this study need to relate to the findings of this study and apply these findings to their experiences. Therefore, if the researcher does not accurately depict data, then the reader will have difficulty applying these findings to their experiences (Van Vuuren, 2014). Therefore, it is important that when reporting research findings, the researcher needs to report findings in an accurate and credible manner, and further ensure that the findings are balanced, non-judgmental, and neutral.

Reflexivity

As mentioned above, it is important for the researcher to have self-understanding. Therefore, the researcher needs to demonstrate self-awareness to their personal qualities

and characteristics and the intersectionality of their race, gender, and social class, to those of the research participants (Brink et al., 2012). The researcher therefore should avoid having preconceived ideas and avoids being judgmental towards the experiences of participants (Brink et al., 2012).

This research study's qualitative research design was chosen as the researcher demonstrated interest in understanding the subjective viewpoints of the postgraduate students. The research methodology approach allows for the exploration of individual experiences paying close attention to the participants reality. Therefore, it was important for the researcher to have an awareness and to acknowledge their own reality and experiences as they could have impacted the data. Therefore, constant self-awareness is important, especially during the interview phase. The researcher therefore reflected on their lived experience in relation to their social reality through keeping a journal and documenting thoughts and feelings experienced, and further used personal therapy to make sense and meaning of their own experiences in relation to those of the postgraduate students.

Furthermore, the researcher is Black and English/Zulu speaking female coming from middle class family, whereas the students participating in this study were Black and English/Zulu/IsiXhosa speaking and of a low socio-economic status. The intersection of ethnicity and class evidenced did not appear to affect the research process, perhaps because the interviews involved a student population, which can be seen to represent a transitional social class. In addition, the researcher identified with the experiences of the postgraduate students and this may have impacted the research process as the researcher's experiences correspond with those mentioned by the postgraduate students. Therefore, it was crucial to reflect on and make sense of these experiences. Any further issues were taken to supervision to discuss and make sense of.

The researcher's experience of being a student at a higher education institution, heightened the passion to understand the different experiences and discourses around race and achievement. This passion further added to the interest in understanding the barriers

and challenges that disadvantaged students experience during their years of study at a university. This contributed to the researcher's interest in influencing to policy change seen in universities in order to assist perspective students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical clearance for this research study was first obtained from the University of Witwatersrand, before this study commenced. Strict ethical guidelines were adhered to by The Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical). These guidelines state that researchers are expected to handle confidential matters with utmost attention, truthfully inform participants, and to ensure that they receive consent from all participants before proceeding in the research study. Therefore, ethical clearance by this committee was required before commencing this research study (see Appendix A).

In addition to ethical clearance, at the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the research study was explained to all the postgraduate students. All the postgraduate students were therefore clear in the purpose of the research study before participating. The postgraduate students were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process. During the interview, when the postgraduate students were asked questions that triggered certain mental health challenges, referrals for psychological intervention at CCDU (Counselling and Careers Development Unit) and the Emthonjeni Centre were made available. The postgraduate students' dignity and privacy were at all times maintained and honoured. Therefore, it was the researcher's responsibility to protect the participants from any physical, social or psychological harm.

All data and personal information obtained in this study was kept confidential. Therefore, transcripts employed pseudonyms for the protection of students' identity. As the interviews were audio-recorded, all the postgraduate students signed consent forms for the audio-recording of the interview. Each audio recordings was stored in a password protected laptop, which was kept safe. Only the researcher and the research supervisor will have

access to the audio-recordings. After the completion of this study, the audio-recordings will be kept securely for a period of five years.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the research methodology of the study. The research design expands on the procedures followed, the method of analysis, the researcher's reflexivity and the ethical issues considered when conducting this investigation. The proceeding chapter, chapter 4 will present the analysis of the data obtained and further discuss the broad themes and outcomes found.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings and the discussion of the study. The students in this study were interviewed on the various factors that positively or negatively influenced their academic journeys in their attainment of academic success. The findings from this analysis, outline the broad themes which are explained in the form of narrative account. The four broad dominant themes that are defined and explained are: 1) family background, 2) motivation, 3) university factors influencing academic success, and 4) social support. The findings of this study are therefore presented in line with these four broad themes.

Family Background

From an analysis of the data, it become evident that many students who had attained academic success, had overcome and endured challenging and difficult circumstances, together with their families, in order to acquire a higher education qualification. This study shows the different aspects within the family structure and family environment which positively and negatively impacted on students' ability to attain and acquire academic success in higher education.

Home/Living Environment

According to Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011), the strongest outcome to academic performance is the home environment. The student participants in this study expanded on their living conditions and the home environment in which they grew up in. Their assertions highlight the link seen between their family's socio-economic status and their access to resources, which impacts on their educational attainment. For instance, Musa said "So, obviously we live in your normal...I think they call it...your standard township like household. Whereby it's like maybe plus minus four to six rooms. Uhm we stay in the house together, whereby mom works as a caregiver." (Musa). Musa, in this excerpt made an important statement on township residential areas in South Africa, by implying that these households originate from the offshoots of Apartheid. During Apartheid, low-cost housing was given to Black workers who had to reside closer to where they were employed (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011). Today these 'townships' are characterised by unfavourable conditions such as

poverty (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011). This is therefore a mirroring of racial discrimination experienced in apartheid which still impacts a student's socio-economic status and that of their families.

A number of the participants either grew up in or were still living in a traditional African household, which includes the extended family. Moore (2001) states that an extended family is one which consists of at least three generations. Furthermore, a large portion of South African households have 'alternative' family structures such as grandmothers living with grandchildren, child-headed households, and others (Pillay, 2016). This is due to biological parents or other family members passing away, among other factors (Maikwame, 2011). This type of living structure is more prevalent in rural communities (Pillay, 2016). Mbali demonstrated this type of household as a result of familial death:

I'm currently living with family members. So, it's my grandparents, my aunt and my nephew... So with my mother's side, uhm, yah, there's just a lot of cousins that we live with. I think there's like six of us. Five or six of us and we all live in the same household with my aunt, my mom and my grandmother. So there are not really, there aren't any male figures at home. It's only the little boys at home. So most of my uncles and grandfather have passed on. (Mbali)

Ndumiso also expanded on his home environment which revealed the living structure explained above of grandparents living with their grandchildren when he said, "I stay with my grandmother, my mother, my sisters and uhm their daughters." (Ndumiso). In addition to most families living with grandparents, as seen with Ndumiso, research in South African also shows that it is common for grandmothers to be the primary caregivers of their grandchildren (Maikwane, 2011). Themba was able to speak to his experiences of being raised by his grandmother:

I was obviously raised by my grandparents and so that's why I call them mama and papa. My parents, I call them by their names which is super weird but it's the reality of a lot of us who are raised by their grandparents. (Themba)

Themba was able to indirectly link his family's socio-economic status and his home environment. Research demonstrates that those children who stay with extended family members have limited access to resources that facilitate educational attainment (Biblarz & Raftery, 1999). Such family structures and home environments are thus seen to impact and influence students' opportunity to complete their tertiary studies. Thus, family composition is an important factor in academic success.

Educational History of Family Members

Parental background is said to play an important role in the academic achievement of children (Perger & Takacs, 2016). Students who have parents who have been through higher education, are better prepared for higher education due to their parents' guidance and direction (McMillan & Barrie, 2012). The participants were able to show awareness on their parents or caregivers' educational background, and/or their lack of education and failure to complete high school, obtain a secondary education/Grade 12 qualification or attend higher education. Two participants indicated that they had a parent who obtained a higher education qualification. Thandi expressed of both her parents having attended and attained a higher education qualification, therefore making her a second-generation higher education student. This, as described by McMillan and Barrie (2012), put her at an advantage in receiving greater guidance and support to adjust to the higher education system. She therefore explained:

My mom has...they both have degrees and all that. My dad studied a bit further because of IT. He did smaller nyana courses here and there, all the time. So, he has a lot of qualifications, and my mom...I think she also did Psychology. She did industrial I think, yah. (Thandi)

When Thandi was asked to expand on the level of support that she received from her parents, she said "My parents...are very supportive when it comes to education...Like even getting into Wits. My mom was the one who was active in that" (Thandi). Her response shows how social capital can positively influence a new student to adjust and navigate

institutional structures, which puts them at a greater chance to attain academic success.

Ndumiso also expanded on his mother's educational journey "My mother has just got a degree. So back then...she is a teacher... she had a diploma, but she just got a degree. My dad...I am not sure" (Ndumiso). Therefore his excerpt speaks to his mother first obtaining a diploma and then obtaining a degree, which demonstrates the progressive nature of her educational history and her motivation to continue pursuing her studies. As mentioned by McMillan and Barrie (2012), this may have been an advantage for Ndumiso during his pursuit of acquiring a higher education qualification.

However, other participants spoke to their parents/caregivers receiving post-secondary education through short courses, certificates or diplomas. Busi expressed her awareness of her mother's level of education when she said "She has a diploma, I think. Yes she has a diploma. She never got to finish her degree. Yeah, she has a diploma in accounting" (Busi). She therefore indirectly expressed her mother's wish to acquire a higher education qualification, in still completing and attaining a post-secondary qualification. Mary also spoke of her father acquiring a post-secondary qualification whilst also referring to her mother's education journey of acquiring various post-secondary qualifications, therefore seemingly upgrading her educational capacity when she said:

Uhm, so my dad...Like when you're a traffic officer you do a diploma. So, they're qualification is a diploma in that...My mom has a matric. But now that she is a counsellor, she did a certificate in counselling. And being a teacher for day-care children. So, she has done all those qualifications. (Mary)

In the case where parents were not able to acquire a higher education qualification, other parents pursued their studies in acquiring various post-secondary qualifications. Mbali expanded on her mothers' level of education when she said "Hmm. Secondary school, yah. She did complete short courses in college...But yah, secondary school" (Mbali). She therefore referred to her mother completing secondary education and also acquiring various post-secondary qualifications. However, other students only referred to the achievement of a

secondary education qualification. Lerato explained how both her parents only completed secondary education “*What was their highest level of education?* Both of them matriculated....*So, they didn't go into University?* No. they didn't “(Lerato). Through her assertions, one can also realise that both her parents did not acquire a higher education qualification but completed secondary education. Therefore some parents may have completed secondary but did not further their studies to acquire a higher education qualification. Other participants expanded on their parents struggles in obtaining a secondary education qualification. Themba expressed this same struggle when making reference with regard to his parents’ education history:

Uhm, so my dad has only up until grade 11...I think he dropped out in grade 12 or he failed one or two or three subjects. I can't remember. And then my mom is the one who matriculated then she went to try pursue higher level studies...I don't think she succeeded in that. I think that's when I was born...So she had to drop out. That's when she started having to look for piece jobs and part-time jobs here and there to try get by. (Themba)

Themba's account demonstrated the educational backgrounds of both his parents, who were both unable to acquire higher education qualifications. He also expanded on his father's struggle in not being able to complete grade 12. Both his parents resorted to finding jobs to provide financially for their family. His account sheds light on the educational experiences of parents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This was also expressed through Mbali's account about her mother “Yoh she doesn't have matric hey, she like very not educated. Like in the traditional sense of the education system” (Mbali).

Evidenced above are the educational shortfalls brought about by apartheid. The parents or guardians of these participants were all victims of apartheid based on their residential areas and due to the education received pre-1994. Many of the Black learners at that time either dropped out of school or rather found it more valuable to search for jobs in order to alleviate the financial burdens experienced. A small percentage of Black students

furthered their studies or had access to complete a higher education due to oppressive apartheid system. This therefore produced lower education achievements amongst Black people and lowered educational motivation and aspiration. It was only post 1994, when educational policies were changed and higher education institutions were transformed, that focus was put on increasing access to those previously shut out. This therefore explains the participants' accounts of their parents not completing a secondary education or not further their studies to complete and acquire a higher education qualification.

First Generation Students

Higher education post 1994 underwent restructuring and transformation. The changes in the education system created a space for increased access of previously marginalised Black students into university. Although, most of the student body in universities now comprise of Black students, the enrolment and participation rates still reflect the racial inequalities of the past. Therefore, post-1994 till today, many Black students who apply and enrol into university and higher education institutions are first generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds (McMillan & Barrie, 2012). First generation students refer to those students who are currently enrolled at higher education institution, whose parents did not attend higher education or complete any post-secondary qualifications (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). The student movements experienced in 2015 such as the #FeesMustFall movements are further evidence of the barriers experienced in accessing higher education for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. According to Dr Danny Fontaine-Rainen, the director of the First-Year Experience (FYE) project at the University of Cape Town, 50% of students entering university are the first individuals in their families to attend university (Davids, 2019). Of the 11 students interviewed, three explained how they were either the first in their family to attend university or were the first in their family to graduate and obtain a degree. Busi, when expanding on her home environment expressed "... well we live in eLusikisiki which is like the deep rural areas of the Eastern Cape. Not a lot of people work in my family...well, I'm the only one in university from my dad's family" (Busi).

She therefore stated that she is the first person from her father's side of the family to have access to higher education. Mary expressed her first-generation graduate status when she said "*So, you're the first one to finish University?* Yah, I am. Out of all my siblings as well" (Mary). Mary is not only the first in her family to graduate but the first of her siblings. This reveals the significance she has placed on higher education and obtaining a qualification. Even more interestingly, Thandi expresses how she was the first in her family to pursue a postgraduate qualification "*Are you the first one to do a postgraduate degree?...from my mom's side, yes*" (Thandi).

McMillan and Barrie (2012) maintain that first generation students lack access to experienced people who can assist them to cope with the academic and sociocultural demands of university. This study highlights the value of a parent's experience of higher education and the positive influence in guiding and assisting students in navigating higher education. However, it seems that Busi, Mary and Thandi were still able to rise above these unfavourable conditions and attain academic success.

Parental/Caregiver Employment

Most of the parents or caregivers of the participants were struggling to find employment during their children's pursuit of acquiring a higher education qualification or were unemployed. According to Cardak and Givon (2004), students from low socio-economic families where parents are unemployed or receive minimal pay, find it more difficult to access higher education. This research study supports this finding and further expands on the financial barriers experienced in accessing higher education and the increased level of pressure that students experienced to complete their studies in order to financially assist their families. Lerato explained how her parents' socio-economic position impacted her chances of acquiring a tertiary qualification:

Uhm as one does, you struggle throughout life you know, trying to put yourself through school and everything was on their shoulders. Really, because also the family was struggling so you can't really reach out to anybody. So they worked really

hard to I guess make it on their own despite all the obstacles they were facing as time went on...At one point my dad had to sell his car so that we make a living, make means. They made huge sacrifices in order to get me to at least a place where they can say, "okay she will be well off if she continues academically". (Lerato)

Through this account, one can understand the pressure Lerato experienced in excelling in her academic studies. Such experiences highlighted how the lack of sufficient income can hinder students from accessing higher education. It further highlights the financial pressure experienced by low socio-economic parents in obtaining funds in order to allow their children to academically progress. What was also found in this study, were students within low-income households, experiencing their parents work to provide for their families, almost on a day-to-day basis, in order to make ends meet for their families. Thapelo explained his family's financial situation when he said:

Like my mom would work at uhm express stores. She used to work at pep stores just to get some sort of income in, and my dad would drive taxis that would take people from townships to town and back. It was just a matter of trying to get some source of income coming through. Then at home, my grandparents had like a small business. So they were self-employed. My grandmother still operates it where she sells chickens to the people in the community. Sometimes she goes to Welkom to stock like clothing, jackets for winter, so people can buy...Uhm so I'd say that they tried as best as they could to have multiple sources of income to get us by. (Thapelo)

In unfavourable circumstances some students expressed of the lack of income experienced in their family. Busi explained how her family members are unemployed and how they had struggled to sustain employment:

Most of us are just uhm, well...Uhm, my uncle used to work but he got retrenched. My grandad has a business that's kind of fumbling right now because of the weather and stuff because they do welding and make gates and all those things. I also have a step grandmother. She doesn't work, she's like a housewife. (Busi)

Her account therefore highlighted the extreme unemployment in her family and their struggle to obtain stable jobs or a source of income. The participants expressed their awareness on their family's dire financial conditions. The financial conditions of families and insufficient income became a barrier to acquiring higher education, as all efforts were spent on using all the financial resources to uplift and sustain the family. These students depict a strong awareness to the dire financial conditions of their families and how this contributes to their socio-economic positionality. However, although some participants identified their families having limited financial resources, most of these students expressed how their parents managed to acquire employment. Ndumiso expressed his parent's employment status by stating "My mom is a teacher. My dad is a janitor" (Ndumiso). Reneilwe also spoke to her parent's employment status when she explained "My dad is a policeman and my mom's a teacher" (Reneilwe).

Although it may be often perceived that the greatest barrier to receiving a higher education qualification and attaining academic success is lack of finance, there seemed to be a general awareness amongst the participants of various financial options available such as bursaries, funding opportunities and scholarships, that potentially lessened the financial burden of parents. However, they were still able to identify the financial position of their families and how their family's financial difficulties acted as barriers to accessing higher education, which will be further discussed below. The plight of their financial circumstances were therefore seen to negatively influence these participants.

Family Support

Family support was an important influence in the participants attaining academic success. According to Anderson (2003), the amount of time and effort invested into a child will influence whether the child attends school, the quality of the school and the amount of money spent on the child's schooling.

Positive Family Support. According to McMillan and Reed (1993), parental commitment that provides support and informal counselling, helps in the child in achieving

success. Positive encouragement fostered perseverance and motivation in the participants. Thapelo explained that after he had registered for his first year, the funding he had acquired fell short and he was left without funding. He expressed the level of support received from his family during this challenging time "...My family felt like it's best for them to encourage my dreams...they understood" (Thapelo). During challenging times, positive family support encouraged these students to continue progress in their studies. Reneilwe mentioned the family support she experienced "...They call from time to time to check up on me. My mother sends me prayers...And also financially when I need something, they are there for me. I know I can call them" (Reneilwe). Reneilwe referred to this type of support from family. One may receive emotional support, financial support, physical support, and even spiritual support. These different forms of support seemed to encourage Reneilwe on her educational journey, to the point where she knew that with whatever difficulty she faced, she could call on her parents for assistance and support.

Support may also be experienced from people outside the nuclear family, such as aunts, uncles and even grandparents. This level of support was expressed by Busi when she was explaining the influence of her uncle's support together with her mother's financial support:

...But I was fortunate enough because my uncle was working at the time in first year, and he was working here in Joburg...Yeah, so everything I needed he would help out.

...My uncle was like my biggest support system but my mom she came through financially, my stepmom. Even though we couldn't get along but if I said I need money for whatever she's going to help out how she can. (Busi)

Establishing and forming supportive personal attachments, outside the nuclear family, was seen to facilitate academic environment.

Further, family support appears to be an important influencing factor of academically successful low SES students, as parents have higher expectations and the pressure applied

enables a child to work hard to attain academic success (McMillan & Reed, 1993). This was also evident in this study. Musa spoke of his family's socio-economic status and how his parent's positive encouragement motivated him to progress in his studies, when he said:

Each and every time you hear mom talking about how not having an education, proper education, it's like a problem nowadays. So each and every time she always tried by all means to motivate and say "you know what, don't give up. Just continue studying, uhm reaching your goal because at the end of the day you know you want to study and what you want to be. And on our side we didn't have access to education. So at least if there is still room for you to go and study, then do it!" (Musa)

Therefore, his mother's positive encouragement consisted of reminding Musa of their family's socio-economic status. Therefore, for some students, the reminder of their families economic positioning further pushed them to continue studying in order to obtain a qualification to alleviate their family's economic circumstances. Similar motivation was experienced by Mary through her father's encouraging words of advice. When speaking to the level of support she received from her parents she said:

My parents have always encouraged me to go to school you know. And my dad always said to me that if he had the opportunity he would've studied further. So he wanted to study further but that story is sad spot for him until today, cause he had the marks and he qualified to go and do law but his mom, when he had to pay for tuition, she ended up buying a house...And a family member was supposed to pay for his registration and then the lady pulled out. And then he was like what's the next best option, and then he went and he became a police officer... So, my dad is always saying to me, "You see, your kids can't be going through the same thing that you went through". (Mary)

Her account of her father's experience of failing to access higher education, highlighted her awareness of the importance her family placed on obtaining a higher education qualification to ensure future generations had access to this privilege. Therefore, through her father's

advice or positive encouragement she was able to receive positive support on her venture in pursuing a higher education qualification. This was echoed by Lerato when was asked whether her parents have positively or negatively influenced her academic journey:

I'd say in a very positive way because I think that through their experiences, they've seen that the main and only way to get out of poverty and disparity is through education, is through knowing more, its through doing better. (Lerato)

Her response highlighted the link between her parents' positive support which impacts on her knowledge formation and in her obtaining a higher education qualification, which will eventually lead to breaking the cycle of poverty in her family. This research therefore found that there is a relationship between the level of positive encouragement received by family and positive academic outcomes. This is demonstrated by Creighton (2007), stating that the lack of support and isolation does not facilitate learning or bring about positive measures towards student success.

Negative Family Support. Smitz-Sciborski (2011, as cited in Perger & Takacs, 2016) explored the difficulties experienced by first-generation students whose parents did not attend university and the support these students received. Several participants expanded on parents' lack of understanding about university and acquiring a tertiary and/or post graduate qualification. However, most of the parents' expectations were that once their children obtain a higher education qualification and graduate, then they will be obtaining a job and financially assist the family. Themba expanded on the pressure exerted on him by his parents to complete his studies and their lack of understanding of his goal to obtain a post graduate degree:

...I think after my bachelors they were just like "okay are you done?" I'm like "no there's still a couple of more years to go" [laughs]. And then after my honours they were like "Are you done now?" and I was like "No. two more years, two more years." And then I think I was super fortunate to have made it straight through from honours

to masters because I don't know what I would've done. What I would've explained.

(Themba)

The parental pressure expressed by Mbali and Themba may further link to a possible first generation student status where their parents did not receive a postgraduate or tertiary degree therefore leading to their lack of understanding to their children's wish/need to acquire higher education qualifications. This understanding was also expressed by Ndumiso:

...My brother could support me but he could support me in as far as he can. Uhm, I mean sometimes he wants to sleep, he wants to switch off the light you know. With him, you are studying, you are passing...you got good marks, you just study during the day. And you can't blame them because they don't have that experience. They don't know what it's like... (Ndumiso)

Ndumiso expressed his brother's lack of understanding and consideration towards his academic work. It seems that the attitude and expectations experienced from parents' or family members led to experiences of feeling unsupported. It also led to these students feeling pressured to get good grades in order to attain a higher education qualification and assist their families financially.

Motivation

Student motivation is an important factor influencing the acquisition of a higher education qualification. The motivation of students within university is due to the attainment of a desired outcome and due to their need to meet their psychological needs (Wu, 2019). Academic motivation and self-esteem are important to the success of disadvantaged students (Petersen et al., 2009). These students (who already have coping abilities when faced with adverse conditions) possess temperamental characteristics that produce positive responses (McMillan & Reed, 1993). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), motivation involves the underlying views and objectives that drive a person to act, it therefore refers to the why of an action. The participants spoke about attaining academic success in relation to being motivated to assist their families financially, acquire wealth and a better economic standing,

or to obtain careers post-qualification. A few participants spoke of attaining a qualification due to being motivated by personal interest or pleasure. Their assertions related to the basic distinctions of motivation in Self-Determination Theory, being extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. These students were thus able to identify extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors that influenced their behaviour in the process of attaining academic success in higher education. These factors are discussed below.

Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation refers to one's engagement in tasks due to external reward. Ryan and Deci (2000), describe extrinsic motivation as any activity which is performed with the efforts of attaining some separable outcome. Therefore, below are the accounts of the participants about the different extrinsic motivational factors that influenced their academic success.

Motivation Influenced by Economic Circumstance. Ryan and Deci (2000) speak to certain behaviours that people performed in order to receive a reward. It emerged in this study that most of participants were motivated to achieve academically due to the great responsibility they felt to assist and alleviate the economic circumstances of their family and those in their community. When Musa was asked why he wanted to acquire a postgraduate qualification, he responded:

So, with this degree, I am hoping to move up, rank up for a better living situation for my siblings, for myself, for my family and also for my community in a way. Because not only as a Black child when you're going studying, I'm studying for many people. The people around me. Me coming back to my community with a degree, it adds something. (Musa)

This statement highlighted his premise for acquiring a higher education qualification, which is not only to achieve academic success, but he is also motivated to academically succeed because of his family's socio-economic status and to alleviate the hardships experienced

due to the historical oppression of Black people. Sipho shared why he is motivated by stating:

...In my case I come from a family that is not well off. So, part of the reason why I continued or why I work hard is because I know that if I don't, then I'm not going to be able to survive and then they not going to be able to survive...There's also a kind of motivation that is informed by the socio-economic conditions really. (Sipho)

He therefore made a direct link to his level of motivation and the socio-economic condition of his family. He later explained why it was important for him to acquire a postgraduate qualification "...I think if I don't and If we don't, then the system remains the same...I just want to feed my family" (Sipho). He thus spoke to the greater reform and transformation he would like to see through the education received by Black students from socio-economically disadvantaged background, however he still asserted that his primary motivation was to ultimately assist his family. This was a common assertion by the participants. Themba expressed his primary motivation by stating:

...I don't think I would've been this driven had it not been because of the circumstances growing up.

...So, I was always driven by "what are they going to say if I don't succeed" ...So, I definitely attribute my success to that fear of being perceived as a failure I guess.

(Themba)

Through his account, Themba demonstrated that he was motivated to succeed academically to assist his family's socio-economic condition. His account further highlighted the pressure he experienced as his family was looking to him to change their circumstances. Most of the participants' motivation was influenced by their familial socio-economic conditions.

Therefore, these accounts illustrate a relationship between motivation and familial socio-economic status in academic success.

Motivation Influenced by Family Values. There are also certain behaviours that are performed to avoid guilt, referring to introjected regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This type

of motivation therefore represents the regulation of one's self-esteem. It was found that the students felt motivated to achieve in order to adhere to and accomplish family standards/values. This type of motivation was influenced by students working hard as an act of gratitude to their parents/family members or due to their need to uphold perceived family standards. Thandi expressed this type of motivational influence when she said:

...I feel pressure from my parents. I feel like I owe them, especially because now they are taking care of my son. So, I owe them to do well at school. And just above that, just trying to uphold the family name and the standard that they have set...

(Thandi)

Mbali commented on the factors that helped her continue progressing through her academic studies, when she said "...I'm the first born. So, that's why the pressure is all on me... That's why I feel all the pressure" (Mbali). Mbali expressed the family pressure she experienced to succeed academically as the first-born child in her family. This pressure influenced her motivation to complete her studies. These assertions further expanded on students' motivation to achieve due to the pressure to make their parents proud and to elevate their family name.

Motivation Influenced by Historical Disparities. Another type of motivation refers to the bringing together of new behaviours to align with one's values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, the more one internalises the reasons for behaving in a certain way and integrates these reasons to their values, the actions become more self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Various participants made reference to external factors influencing their attainment of academic success. These motivating factors were directed towards changing the experiences of Black students in university. Thapelo expressed that:

...For me it was an issue of coming through you know and people might have written me off based on where I come from...but it was an issue of "go there, make sure they change their, you know, their view of where you're coming from". (Thapelo)

Lerato further elaborated on the same premise of being a Black student and the responsibility often placed on Black students from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in order to change the narrative for their children and future Black students. She mentioned this when speaking to her financial struggles and how it affected her motivation to study.

...It actually drove me if anything. That I don't ever want to be in this position again.

So I'm going to get this done so that I never have to put my own children through it and I don't want to put myself through that again, because I know how it feels. So it motivated me if anything. (Lerato)

Motivation Influenced by Transformation and Reform. The form of agency seen in the motivational influence of bringing change to Black student narratives, was also expressed in regard to influencing society at large. Another perspective mentioned on motivation to attain academic success, spoke to the need to make a difference and to become an agent of change. This was evidenced in Lerato's assertion when she spoke about being driven with an inherent need to help others, which also drove her to continue progressing in her studies.

...my need to make a difference. I really think there needs to be way more people, I don't know, just hold on, hold on super tight onto that need to make a difference, because there's so so much we still need to do and uhm if we all sit on our hands, nothing is going to change. So I think it's those daily reminders...(Lerato)

Themba further added to this premise of continuing his studies due to the need to make a difference in the lives of others. When he asked why he chose his field of study, he expressed:

I grew up in domestically violent household, where my father would abuse my mother. And so, I think for the most part I went into psychology because I wanted to be some sort of rescuer. Not only for my siblings particularly, but I think for other people that have similar experiences to me. (Themba)

His assertion therefore highlighted that students may be motivated to academically progress due to extrinsic factors of assisting others, communities and societies in and around their influence.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to when a person performs a behaviour due to the satisfaction they receive and not due to a separate external cause (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this way a person is moved to act because of the excitement or pleasure of completing a task rather than external pressures or rewards. Below are the assertions of students who made reference to intrinsic motivational factors which influenced their academic success.

Motivation Influenced by Passion/Desire to Excel. The participants sought to acquire qualifications mainly because of the passion or desire to achieve, the reward being academic success. Therefore, intrinsic motivation and the attainment of academic success provided these students the satisfaction of their psychological needs being met. When Thapelo spoke to his course and the academic demands he was experiencing, he said “I’m doing something that I love, something I’m passionate with...It’s the passion rather than me just studying. It’s the passion, it’s me trying to achieve something that’s somewhat aligned to my purpose” (Thapelo). Therefore, one can see that he was intrinsically motivated to acquire his degree and to continue his studies. His assertion demonstrated how his primary psychological needs of competence, achievement, desire and autonomy were also being satisfied. Other students elaborated on the intrinsic factors that impacted on their attaining academic success: “*And what has helped you to continue progressing from your undergraduate years up until you graduated?* Hunger for success...I wanna be the best version of myself” (Reneilwe). Reneilwe’s response supports that her primary motivating factor in her academic succeeding was her drive to achieve and succeed. Additionally, other participants expressed that their motivation was influenced by their desire to one day become a working professional and acquire a career. This was seen in Musa assertion, when he commented on what kept him motivated whenever he lost interest in his studies:

...And some of the premise that I made to myself is to say “No I want to reach a specific goal within a specific age. I want to be able to become a professional one day”. Because I remember one thing, I always tell my mom...that I want to move from the title of Mr to Dr or Professor. (Musa)

Therefore, his desire to become an academic and to acquire a professional title further motivated him to progress in his studies and in ultimately becoming academically successful.

Motivation Influenced by The Fear of Failure. Some students were motivated to succeed academically due to their fear of failure. Reneilwe expressed the following:

When you lose interest in your modules or when you find it challenging, what do you think keeps you motivated?

[pause]..The thought of failing...I’m really scared of failing. I know they say that you have to, you have to fail from your experiences, but I am scared of failing. (Reneilwe)

This same premise and fear of failure was also expressed through Mbali’s assertions when she said “I’m someone who is scared of failure. Failure does things to me because I’m a perfectionist...at the end of the day it’s what motivates me, it pushes me...” (Mbali). Their assertions demonstrated how the fear of failing motivated them to continue progressing in order to academically achieve. A different perspective on the fear of failure was expressed by Themba “... I was always driven by “what are they going to say if I don’t succeed...So, I definitely attribute my success to that fear of being perceived as a failure I guess” (Themba). Therefore, the fear of failing and the fear or being perceived as a failure contributed to motivating these students to continue progressing in their academic studies in hopes of attaining academic success.

Motivation Influenced by Internal Locus of Control. According to McMillan and Reed (1993), internal locus of control is seen to facilitate academically achievement in socio-economically disadvantaged. An account given by Mary expands on this:

...University prescribes that you finish in 3 years. So then when that does not happen? For me personally it had to take a lot for me to say “You know what, this is

not happening in 3 years but at the end of the day you want it to happen. So just focus on getting it done. Whether you do it on record time, or it doesn't. Just focus on getting it done" ...I was determined to finish what I started...I feel like that's what kept me going (Mary)

Through her excerpt, Mary's (internal) desire motivated her to continue her studies even when she felt discouraged. When analysing the responses of the participants, it was evident that one student can be extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to attain academic success. Thus, one student can be motivated due to interest and pleasure whilst also being driven by the need to assist their families and greater community.

University Factors Influencing Academic Success

The participants entered university from a position of extreme inequality and experienced various challenges relating to race, class, resources, funding, support and other social circumstances. This theme expands on the factors that the participants felt had an impact on their academic success.

Students' Perceptions of Academic Success

The meaning of academic success is debatable as it may vary depending on subjective perspectives (York et al., 2015, as cited in Cachia, Lynam & Stock, 2018). This understanding is important in analysing the participants' understandings of academic success. The students were asked to define academic success and the influencing factors that impact on students' academic success. Some students attributed academic success to the hard work put in to achieving a goal whilst other students spoke directly to the intersecting nature of class and race when defining academic success. Lerato shared what academic success meant to her:

Academic success...I think irregardless of what stage you make it to, it's walking out more knowledgeable than you did walking in. So, even if you made it to first year and couldn't move on to second year, you gained something in first year. You gained knowledge you never knew before until you entered that space you know. So I

wouldn't cap it on a paper, cap it on somebody giving you an 80...I think it's subjective to what that person gained and what the person walked away with...I think any knowledge is good knowledge. Any knowledge is a success in your right. So I think it's what you walked away knowing that you didn't know before. (Lerato)

In Lerato's view, academic success was attributed to the attainment of knowledge.

Contrastingly, Themba ascribed academic success to high assessment grades and academic progression:

Well for me, I think academic success would look something like being satisfied with one, the marks that I'm getting and two, the progress that I'm making as well, because I don't think they are separable because I mean if you get good marks it means you progress. If you get average marks, then the chances of you progressing get slimmer and slimmer...(Themba)

Musa alternatively attributed academic success to the successful completion of a specified goal and one's motivation in accomplishing the achieved goal:

Uhm, I think it means...going to a space from a place of hunger, hunger for success. Being able to get into a space to attain success and into that space of owning your own part in it. So you coming from a place whereby you had the desire to learn but for it to be a success, you need to put in more effort into coming to make sure you attain a specific qualification...And with that means it will give you a sense of completion and contentment because now maybe you've achieved a specific goal in which you wanted to achieve... (Musa)

Sipho expressed his viewpoint in emphasising that the concept of academic success often depicts or describes a specific student with specific attributes, when he said:

...being able to live up to your potential. Like being able to fully realise that in the most basic sense. But also then how do you fair within that system, with the academics, during your years at university...when we think of academic success, automatically whoever becomes a statistic or a measure or indicator of what

academic success is, there's always a particular person. Someone of a certain class...on the other end you have people who really struggle, who come from poor families, who know that they have to work hard...So, they also become used as an example of academic success. (Sipho)

It is therefore seen that these four participants all attributed academic success to differing contributing factors, which may be influenced by their own subjective experiences of education or higher education. Therefore posing the question of whether one's subjective experiences influence the way he/she views academic success or the factors which they attribute to academic success.

Higher Education Challenges/Experiences

There is vast number of students who previously could not access university and are now able to enter university. According to Tjønneland (2017), more than half of the university student population are African students. Issues of access, equity, transformation, funding and academic performance remain the leading challenges faced in higher education in South African (Mouton et al., 2013). Mentioned below are the challenges mentioned by the participants that played a role in or contributed to their attainment of academic success.

Barriers in Accessing Higher Education

According to McKay et al. (2018), admission of students into higher education is critical in resolving the country's economic problems. However, within this context, students face various barriers that hinder them from accessing higher education (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). When referring to barriers experienced by disadvantaged students in accessing a higher education qualification, Sipho expressed:

First of all, the history of this country, the inequality with income inequality that exists...the structure of society as it exists, forget about the university system, before we even try you know talking about access to education. There are basics that people are unable to access. So, even at societal level, whatever that is reflected

within the university system speaks, to the society in which we live in and which exists...the issues are much deeper than the University...(Sipho)

He shed light on his viewpoint, stating that the university system is a reflection of the greater societal structure and the inequalities still experienced due to South Africa's historical past.

Musa further expanded on barriers that hinder access and progression in higher education:

I think it's still going to be the issues of socio-economic status, where you come from, the issue of bursaries, the issue of race, the issues of...falling prey to being excluded because maybe they feel like I'm not performing better...Lastly, would be an issue of saying uhm, not having access to things like laptops and going to this online space. Many people are going to fall behind...

Some of the friends which I have, which are still at Wits and also in other institutions, they're still facing certain issues whereby race becomes an issue, socio-economic status, issues of access then uhm, funding becomes a major issue... (Musa)

He therefore referred to the varying issues experienced by students who are socio-economically disadvantaged and who come into the university with different experiences and life circumstances. Therefore, in order to have greater access into higher education attention needs to be placed on challenges such as language, race, class and other interconnected structures and systems that contribute to the social and economic inequality (McKay et al., 2018). Mary spoke to this gap created when sharing of her observed experiences regarding the quality of education received by her cousins:

...having interacted with some of my cousins and stuff that go to public schools, like with the way they are taught, they are not prepared enough to get good marks that will give them access to go to university. So, they are already at a disadvantage, cause the marks they get and the attention that they get has already hindered them from going to university...even though people have the heart and passion, and they want to go. (Mary)

The interconnectedness of South Africa's education system poses a grave challenge (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Therefore, a malfunction in one level creates a ripple effect onto other levels (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Due to the education inequalities experienced during apartheid, the aftereffects of lack of resources, inhibited knowledge and skills production has been evidenced across the entire education system (Chetty & Pather, 2015). This creates a gap amongst students who are historically disadvantaged, preventing them from entering and accessing higher education.

Interestingly, Siphos expressed a different viewpoint on the disparities between private and public school scholars:

And maybe it speaks to the education that you received in high school and primary school?

I mean not necessarily the education I received but more to do with the systematic difference at a broader societal level. Like if we are to talk about the public education system and the private education system then maybe yes that's true. I think for me, my teachers did what they could with what was available to them, and the same applies to everyone else who went to my high school. But of course, when it comes to how resources public schools are then yes, the point stands right. Uhm, so yes, there's definitely a conversation to be had about the private education system, you know, and the kind of education that I received. (Siphos)

20 years into democracy, the country's secondary education system should be producing students who are prepared to embark on their higher educational studies (Chetty & Pather, 2015), however the education received in secondary school creates pre-entry challenges for prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Funding

Over the past years, mass student protests have highlighted the issue of student funding (McKay et al., 2018). Students from socio-economically disadvantaged families often do not have access to the funding needed to pursue a higher education qualification.

Therefore, there is a vast number of these students that require funding and there are limited funds available to support them, which leaves many students without funding (McKay et al., 2018). Themba documented his journey in attaining funding, which foreshadows the different experiences and funding options, that will be discussed in this section. Themba explained:

Uhm, so first year my grandmother paid for the registration and then during the year there was absolutely nothing that paid for my fees...I think my parents went and had to take a loan for my fees with the hope that...next year you will get funding. So, they went to take out a loan, but it was not enough...I think they were only able to pay like a quarter if not two quarters. And then the rest was settled by uhm, Wit's donors. Second year came and luckily that's when they introduced the waiver option, to waiver the registration fee...and then second year we had run out of options now because we, my parents are already still paying for that loan. My parents were exhausted, like they had exhausted like their financial resources, my grandmother had also exhausted her financial resources. So, second year that debt turned over into the following year...Towards the end of second year there was a municipality bursary back home that was advertised...going into third year I fortunately got that bursary that paid for everything, but I still have outstanding debt from the amount of second year...the Wits donors again towards the end of the year settled my 2017 debt, which would mean I would graduate for my bachelors, I know a miracle, it was just like wow! And then going into honours I performed well enough to get the PGMA...to pay for my tuition. My res fees...didn't have funding. So, the year went by and with the stipend that I got, I'd pay what I can to the accounts so that I can lessen the fees...By the end of the year again, fortunately a donor...settled my fees again so that I can get into Masters. Uhm, then Master's I don't have funding...so, my internship money is still going to Wits, ridiculous...it's really unfortunate that I have to now pay my fees with my first salary but it's the reality we are facing...(Themba)

His account documents the challenges, pressures and struggles that these students faced in accessing higher education, in acquiring academic funding, in graduating and in attaining academic success. Funding was regarded by all the participants interviewed, to be an important influencing factor in students' academic achievement. Students expressed worrying about finances more than focusing on their studies. Students reported acquiring funding through scholarships, bursaries, loans and various other avenues. Also mentioned by participants is their struggle to obtain funding for other budget costs such as living expenses, transport, and other resources necessary to advance their studies.

Wits Discretionary/Hardship Fund. When speaking to funding and financial costs, Reneilwe spoke to her lack of funding for her accommodation costs. She commented on her experience of sending in an application to the Wits Discretionary fund for her accommodation fees:

I have res fees which amount to about forty something thousand...

But it shows thirty-seven. So, I have applied for the donation...I think it's anonymous donation. Yah, but it is there on self-service. So, I applied for it.

...I don't know what I am going to do next year if I'm coming back to Wits. I'll have to pay the thirty seven thousand first to, to register. (Reneilwe)

Reneilwe made reference to the anonymous donor platform (the discretionary/hardship fund) chaired by the Financial Aid and Scholarships Office (FASO) at Wits, which provides funds to students on behalf of corporates, trust funds and individual donors. The hardship fund was created in response to the University recognising that a great number of students need financial assistance and accommodation fees due to socio-economic circumstances (University of the Witwatersrand, 2020). This funding is given to students who meet the criteria for academic achievement or a criterion that is discipline specific. Themba spoke to his positive experience of acquiring funding through this fund:

...Every year I don't know it happens, but my debt seemed to just clear because of donors that Wits has, because I know that I applied for the Discretionary Fund. Uhm,

so donors would just pay for my fees based on my results...I was not even aware that my marks could lowkey get me funding through the University...(Themba)

Themba's funds were paid off every year by Wit's donors due to his academic performance.

Lerato also spoke to her positive experience with the Discretionary Fund:

...at the end of second year, if I'm not mistaken, the government introduced the missing middle situation. So, in third year I applied for the discretionary fund...which gives you a small grant thing where they minus off your fees for being in the missing middle...Discretionary and that gap funding missing middle was what put me through third year...And now that I was on the system for Discretionary fund...the outstanding balance at the end of the year... Absa settled my fees at the end of Honours year.

(Lerato)

Therefore whilst, the receipt of funding from the Discretionary/Hardship Fund is not guaranteed, this platform provided financial assistance and relief to disadvantaged students. A number of students spoke to their positive experience and gratitude in receiving financial assistance and funding through this fund.

Loans and Bursaries. The South African government's aim in increasing access higher education was brought about the establishment of NSFAS (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). According to NSFAS (2021), they provide financial support to disadvantaged students who wish to study in public universities (NSFAS, 2021). They therefore afford historically disadvantaged students the opportunity to study at university (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Though NSFAS costs go up to R1.1 billion each year, the demand for funding proves these high figures to be insufficient (McKay et al., 2018). Those students who do not qualify or those students who obtain the funding and experience funding shortfalls, the onus remains either on universities or the students to make up for the funding shortfalls and acquire alternative funding (McKay et al., 2018). Therefore students seek opportunities to acquire money/funding through grants, bursaries, loans and even search for job opportunities to

manage their financial burdens. Some students even depend on their parents to supplement their expenses together with what they obtain from NSFAS (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012).

The majority of the participants spoke to acquiring NSFAS during their undergraduate qualifications. These students had varying yet similar experiences of acquiring supplementary funding through loans or bursaries. Thapelo acquired multiple forms of funding to cover his higher education fees, he said “Undergraduate I was with NSFAS and then study trust. NSFAS, study trust and the Department of Art and Culture” (Thapelo). Ndumiso also spoke to his experiencing of acquiring multiple funding when he said “I am funded by NSFAS...Undergrad, first year and now I just got a loan. Second year I did NSFAS then I failed a couple of times, so I was off NSFAS and they took me again this year” (Ndumiso).

Other students also spoke of receiving funding from NSFAS and later during their postgraduate qualification, receiving funding for their tuition costs from PMA. Mbali spoke to her funding journey when she said “...for the first three years of varsity, I was using NSFAS and then now I’m using the PMA bursary. So, yah, I’ve been using student loans for most of my studying” (Mbali). Thandi also shared of her journey with NSFAS and PMA funding when she said “So, I was a NSFAS student from first year until third year. And they don’t cover honours and luckily, I’m on PMA. So, I’ve been getting funded” (Thandi). Thandi further expressed her gratitude for being offered the PMA and how it has alleviated the stresses experienced during her academic journey when she said “...it’s difficult you know, so if I didn’t have PMA, I honestly wouldn’t make it...” (Thandi). Like Thandi, Mbali and Musa, Busi spoke of the significant impact of the PMA bursary and how it assisted them to continue their postgraduate studies, when she asserted “I cannot afford my tuition fees...PMA pays for them. So, PMA pays for my books, for my studies” (Busi).

However, some students were not able to qualify for bursaries or loans such as NSFAS. Mary discussed her experience of not qualifying for financial aid:

...when you go and apply for financial aid, like automatically your parents are disqualified because in their minds they are getting above the minimum wage. They assume that their salaries are enough. Your parents could be getting thirty grand...you find that from that thirty grand you are coming home with a take home of like eight thousand. You also have siblings at home. So, they are not taking that into account... And your parents are in debt, so they don't qualify for a loan...So when you apply for financial aid, they are not looking at all those things...(Mary)

She therefore highlighted the state of 'missing middle' students and how her economic positioning impacted her acquisition of funding.

Funding Acquired Through Family Members. Three students attested to receiving financial assistance from family members in order to pay for their academic fees, accommodation and living costs. In two cases, in light of desperately seeking funding to pay for registration fees, family members of the students sacrificed of their own finances to ensure they attend university. Themba described his struggle to pay the registration fees in his first year:

...in high school what was going was that "no if you pass really well then bursaries will be like coming at you, you will be having options like" So I did not apply and unfortunately...registration came, and Wits is like they want R10 000, and my parents are just like that's ridiculous...Well I cannot be grateful enough to my grandmother. She's the most financially wise woman I know. She then said, "no don't worry, I will empty my savings so you can register", and I'm eternally grateful...Had she not started that wheel, then I would not have gotten to where I am today. (Themba)

He explained the reasoning of his family in deciding to accept his grandmother's registration money without knowing how they would pay the rest of his fees when he said "...the idea was that just get in, we'll see what happens as the year progresses. And obviously I tried to apply for bursaries during the year, nothing was successful" (Themba). Mary explained that her parents were unable to pay for her fees and although her father could pay for her

registration fee, she still had outstanding debt to cover. Therefore, her aunt assisted in paying for her outstanding fees:

For me to come back in 2016, my dad could only pay registration which was R10 000.

But at the end of the year, fees were like R46 000 and he couldn't afford to pay that R46 000. So when I came back...my aunt was the one that had to pay the fees from the three years...I still had that outstanding debt that was stopping me from registering.

(Mary)

These accounts demonstrate the positive involvement of family members in assisting with students' tuition fees.

Jobs and Tutor Stipends. Some students obtained jobs in order to alleviate the financial costs of higher education. Thapelo narrated his experience of having to find a job in order to access higher education when he said "Before I came I had to work, work, work. Gather enough money to come here and pay Wits...which was my first plan" (Thapelo). Other students, like Themba, spoke to obtaining jobs within the university environment in order to lessen the financial burden, he added "...I work at the planetarium because I wanted some sort of income that would cover my toiletries, so that I can lessen the burden on my parents and grandparents" (Themba). His account demonstrates how the university provides avenues of income for students. Mary also spoke of acquiring a job at university to alleviate her financial costs:

...I got a part time student job. I was working as a cashier...So when I came back, I didn't get an allowance even though I was on financial aid. It was only paying for accommodation and my fees. Yah, so I had to like get money on the side cause my parents were like okay we will buy you groceries...So I had to find a balance so that I can cover the costs for my transport. So, I had that commitment of having to have a weekend job on Saturday and Sunday. (Mary)

Other students spoke to another source of income avenue created by the university which is through tutoring and administrative work within the university environment. Mbali pursued

tutoring and other administrative roles to supplement her income. She said "...the only commitment I have is that I'm doing the test library duties and then I was also tutoring. From tutoring I came into the test library" (Mbali). Her statement highlighted the positive impact that the university has in alleviating the financial pressure that students face by providing them with opportunities to obtain an extra income.

Lack of Funding. All the participants spoke to struggles in funding their studies, including family circumstances and other social issues which impacted on their ability to pay off their tuition. Thapelo expressed his current funding status as he completed his postgraduate qualification when he said, "Currently I'm not on funding" (Thapelo). He further spoke to his past experience of not acquiring funding to cover his tuition costs when he asserted "I had registered and had funding after matric. But then the problem is that the funders then decided to put me out there on the last moment, on the 11th hour" (Thapelo). Busi further spoke to experiences of witnessing other disadvantaged students not acquiring funding or funding being withdrawn:

...some that I know, they even gave up. Some of them didn't finish they're degrees, they just went back home. I know of a girl who stopped when I was in third year because NSFAS didn't want to fund her anymore, so then she stopped. And another one who had applied for honours but couldn't get funding, so she just went and worked. So I know some of them that actually gave up. (Busi)

When Mbali was asked what would hinder her from completing another postgraduate qualification, she explained that funding is her only hinderance "...if I want to do my masters next year and I don't get a bursary, it would be finances, but I would still be willing to study..." (Mbali). Themba spoke to his experience of not acquiring funding and receiving rejections from bursaries when he said "...I tried to apply for bursaries during the year nothing was successful. Uhm, the whole process is also very daunting having to apply and fill in application forms and then get rejected...It was a really horrible experience..." (Themba). This excerpt demonstrates the discouragement and de-motivation that students

experienced in trying to acquire funding. This process added to the academic pressure they experienced in hopes of eventually obtaining a qualification.

Cost of Higher Education. Participants were asked to expand on their views of the cost of higher education in South Africa. All 11 participants commented on the significant cost of higher education fees. Themba expressed his view on the cost of higher education:

...exorbitant. I feel like university, higher education is extremely extensive. My friend and I always talk about how we pay R300 000 for a piece of paper that does not even guarantee you a job at the end of the day. It's just like, is society always created...coded such that we are always at disadvantage all the time...so it's just like there's obstacles that are put before us so that we don't succeed deliberately...(Themba)

He therefore referred to socio-economic status and the structure of society in explaining his view. Reneilwe made reference that which was alluded to by Busi when she spoke to the experiences of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Reneilwe further expressed her own frustrations with the cost of higher education when she added "...I don't understand why education has to be this...hard to obtain. Because in South Africa we depend on education. We solely depend on education to, to be successful as Black people" (Reneilwe). Ndumiso also expressed his views of higher education when he said:

...I think it's deliberate, you know, that higher education costs so much...we live in a country where the government, but not only the government, where those who control the economy, factories, food production, cannot afford to have the entire population...I think it's by design. And the more people you keep bottled up in the townships, the more things go well for the, for the rich...If you look at the education system, uhm, high schools, primary schools, it's a mess...People don't have chalkboards. Even if they do, the teachers they have cannot think...People cannot access University, but when they access University, they are not taught to think...(Ndumiso)

He therefore shared his frustrations with the socio-economic differences ingrained in society that make it harder for those in the lower ranks to progress.

Amongst all 11 participants, funding and finances was the most referenced challenge in their attainment of academic success. All spoke of their financial difficulties and how their academic fees had impacted their academic achievement and access to higher education. It is therefore seen through their accounts that the process and the struggles that socio-economically disadvantaged students face in paying for their academic fees are unique and, in some cases, unconventional. The participants expanded on their struggles in attaining funding in their undergraduate and postgraduate academic years. Due to their socio-economic circumstances, acquiring funding thus becomes more challenging due to a number of external contextual factors that impact on one's attainment of fees. Therefore, a greater understanding is needed on the complex context-specific conditions concerning student funding in South Africa.

Adjustment

Socio-economically disadvantaged students face countless challenges when commencing their studies at university in adapting to university life (Chetty & Pather, 2015). The transition from secondary school to university seems to serve as another obstacle which thwarts academic achievement (Mouton et al., 2013). These students therefore struggle to successfully assimilate into the university environment in ways not felt by their peers. Busi spoke to her transition period when starting her university studies:

Uhm well when I was in high school, they told us about varsity and whatever. They made it sound like, well it's going to be easy.

...When I started studying Psychology, I didn't really expect it to be the way it is. Like it kept surprising me. And it's been hard. (Busi)

Like Busi, Mbali also spoke to her adjustment from moving from a public school in Lenasia and coming to university at Wits and emphasised the challenge to adapt to a new way of learning:

...moving into a more, what's the word, bigger environment with a lot more people and a lot of personalities, and I think to a different course, which... is something you've never done before because you move from high school having done LO and all those things and then when you get to varsity, it's just different content. So even having to adjust to that new content and having to learn new things in terms of academics, was...a bit of a challenge...(Mbali)

Mbali referred to adjustment to academic content and writing skills when beginning at university, foreshadowing the next topic pertaining to language issues faced by these participants. Mary also expressed the challenge of adjusting to university:

...coming to varsity, I realised the gap...especially being that I am in the Humanities faculty...you did a lot of reading, fine we did that in high school but when it comes to referencing and...paraphrasing...they didn't do that, and when you have to type a whole assignment, you didn't type in high school. So, getting to type...getting information from different sources so that you don't plagiarise...that whole gap, especially with research...I saw that there was a gap... (Mary)

These adjustment struggles didn't only relate to academics. Busi, spoke about her struggle of assimilating to Wits University culture and how other disadvantaged students she knew also struggled to integrate and adjust in social settings:

...I feel like Wit's culture is different from other universities as well. Uhm, in second year...no last year, I was eating in the dining hall. You never really get spoons there, there's like forks and knives and whatever. So, about me, at home I'm used to eating using a spoon, now I have to start learning how to use a fork and sometimes it's embarrassing. Like I'm getting a burger not because I want to but because I can't use my fork right in front of people because I need to go practice first. And I know of a girl who was actually like that. She ate the same thing every day and someone actually asked why, and then she told me that well this is the problem. And I was like well, you can just look at the internet, it's probably going to help you out on how to or you

can come to my place and play around with those things until you are comfortable.

(Busi)

Thapelo makes reference to adjusting to different aspects of the university environment also mentioned by other students, such as the size of lecture halls. He said "...Now moving from a class of 30 or 40 to like 1600..." (Thapelo). He therefore speaks to students' difficulty in adjusting to big lecture classes, previously not experienced in secondary school. Thandi echoed these experiences when reflecting on her adjustment phase:

Uhm, it was challenging in the sense that you go from like a small classroom to a class of like maybe 100 people. I'm not very vocal. When it was a big class it was hard for me to engage...So, that was difficult for me because sometimes you want to say things, but you hold back because of whatever anxieties you have. (Thandi)

Musa similarly explained his adjustment to university after attending a high school located in the township:

Uhm, to be quite honest it was difficult, it was very difficult...the jump is different because I'm used to being in a classroom with 50 people and now to a class of at least about 350 people to 400 people, and you no longer write with a pen you need to type everything out. Everything is...digital, and now you say, no I can't deal with this..(Musa)

The early days of adjusting to university are difficult for most students entering higher education. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds face social and academic integration challenges within the university environment (Chetty & Pather, 2015). A number of academic and environmental factors impact on their adjustment in university which ultimately affects and impacts their attainment of academic success.

Language, Academic Jargon and Writing Skills

According to Mouton et al. (2013), language hinders academic success of students. For most students at university, English is their second language, consequently affecting their academic performance due to their difficulty with language expression compared to the

university standard (Mouton et al., 2013). Therefore, in South Africa, disadvantaged students experience challenges not only in knowledge and skills of courses but also in language competency, understanding the language of instruction in university (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). A major contributing factor to adjustment for a few participants related to the issue of language. Some of these students received their primary and high school education in township schools and were taught in their 'mother tongue' or in other South African languages. This also meant that the teaching and learning languages differed at university. Thapelo expressed his language experience when transitioning into university:

...You come from a school where you are taught in your mother language and any language goes. You can speak Zulu. Whatever the teacher speaks then you go with it. Then you come here, and you are being addressed in English and you must learn as fast as you can. You are quiet even shy to raise up your hand and say...(Thapelo)

This same language struggle was expressed by Reneilwe:

...Okay I come from a, I come from a government school. So, we speak isiXhosa the whole time. So, when I came here, I wasn't used to speaking...English. So, I decided to overcome, to overcome this fear of speaking English or not being vocal when it comes to speaking in English. I, I spoke to people. I made friends that weren't Xhosa or Zulu. I have Tsonga friends, I have Venda friends, who would push me to speak English more. (Reneilwe)

Ndumiso also spoke his awareness of having experienced similar language challenges during lectures:

...It was tough. Even in class you can't just raise your hand and speak, you know. You find that most of the time, like the White kids are very vocal in the class, the Indian kids are very vocal in the class, and then your Model C Blacks are vocal. Then you have those who are like us who speak broken English... So, most of the time I find that someone is going to say something that I wanted to say. So, it's like...why didn't I raise my idea?

You are sitting there just watching...You know, scared that if I speak people are going to laugh at me. Also, you don't want to kill your social life...So language wise, it was difficult...(Ndumiso)

These challenges were mentioned earlier by Thandi when she was expanding on her adjustment at university. She was afraid to speak in class due to the anxiety it caused and because she is not very vocal. Musa also expressed his experience of language difficulties which impacted on his academic performance:

I...am still experiencing them...coming to varsity...they already think in their minds because you come from the townships, you need to be the least...So, coming to Wits, it was a matter of saying uhm, he needs to write in a specific way, he needs to speak in a specific way. Sometimes, you frame stuff, and they will be like "no, but this missing a comma" ...So, I sort of had to learn how to fix my own work from like taking my work to friends to read and to check. I had to get attuned to using Grammarly. I had to...watch videos...that speak about language ability, academic language and what you need to do. I had to do all that to learn to read and make sure that I'm able to get the marks...(Musa)

By incorporating these abovementioned accounts, language issues seemed to influence the adjustment of disadvantaged students and their experiences of higher education.

Belonging

Interacting with other peers within the academic environment was seen as an important contributing factor to attainment of academic success for the participants. Belonging refers to level of encouragement and inclusion a student experiences in university (Moallem, 2013). Students have various opportunities to interact with others at university such as in lecture halls, whilst completing assignments, when consulting and in other environments such as residences or social gatherings. Having positive relationships allowed for greater engagement and integration into the university environment. Mary spoke to the difficulty of having to find and build friendships when commencing studies at university, she

said “Yah, being in the same school from grade 0 until matric, I just had the same friends. Then when I got here, having to make new friendships...not having people around me...made me self-sufficient...” (Mary). Themba further expressed his experience of adjusting to university, citing this same difficulty with of forming friendships:

...So, one thing was a major adaptation for me, was just adapting to the University culture. Uhm, you know, fitting in. because you get here to first year and you're trying to make sure you are as invisible as possible, but at the same time you are trying to make as many friends as you can because you don't want to be walking alone all the time...(Themba)

One can therefore see that when a student is able to form meaningful relationships with, they are likely to share of their experiences and obtain support. These healthy positive relationships assist students to experience the university environment in a non-threatening manner and also allow for the successful integration and assimilation into university.

Being a Black Student in University

Black students from disadvantaged backgrounds face a wide variety of obstacles in higher education (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Although access for these students to higher education has been widened, many higher education institutions in South Africa “retain some lingering racism and certain privileges are still associated with social class” (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012, p. 26). These socio-economically disadvantaged students therefore experience these issues as isolating (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Musa spoke directly to this experience when he shared of an incident that had occurred his lecturer, he said:

...I think it was like third year, in once course. I thought I was like literally doing well until I sent...an essay. It was a take home exam. I submitted it. The marker came back, a White marker and he was like “Why are you attacking my whiteness in your essay?” and I’m like, I wrote from my space, from my intersectionality. So, for them it’s a problem to say...” whatever you write, don’t keep on telling us that because I’m a young Black man. Why do you always have to go like “no because I’m a young

Black man who comes from a different space?”, and I’m like, you’re going to be saying I need to talk about uhm, post-colonialism without...going back to saying I’m part of the group, which was disadvantaged previously, without being able to say this is me? So, it became an issue...(Musa)

When students spoke to their experiences at university, they also referred to issues of class, race and being Black student at university. Mbali recounted her experience of having to manoeuvre around racial differences:

...I remember I was doing archaeology last year, so I did it for three years. And yah, that course had a lot of racial differences...in a way that was something that was so shocking. Coming from a secondary school you used to everyone mixing together and then you get to varsity and its Whites this side, Blacks this side, Indians this side. So, yah...it was that challenge, having to realise what makes you different from other people is you class, your race...(Mbali)

Thandi also commented on her transition from high school to university and made reference to the same class and race struggles mentioned by Mbali:

It was a huge jump. I mean you get to see that, oh so there is privilege now in certain instances, whereas I guess in high school you didn’t see it as much. But here you see it very well. And you see who engages with lecturers, it’s mostly you know White kids. So, you just saw those things and it made me sometimes very uncomfortable. So, there are some people that had access to some privileges, so they didn’t really struggle from jumping from high school to University. But some of them did face some challenges if not more than I did. (Thandi)

Thandi spoke to her awareness of the different socio-economic positions among students at university. Lerato succinctly captures the realities of Black students who come from previously disadvantaged homes and sheds light on her thought process over the years in attaining a degree:

...I didn't even expect to make it as far as I made it, number one. I think first year it was a thing of okay, let's just get through this year. And then second year, let's just get through this year but the degree is so close. And then third year, it obviously was that "okay let me work super hard to see if I can even get into postgrad, let's see if that's a possibility for a female Black child, you know...(Lerato)

Sipho further expressed how the differing socio-economic positions impede a student's attainment of academic success, he said "...I think I didn't have to work as hard if I had started off at the same level as everyone else. Uhm, but other than that, it has been difficult and more challenging than it was meant to be..." (Sipho). These comments highlight how challenges of access, diversity and socio-economic status still hinder the integration of many disadvantaged students in higher education institutions.

Resources

Another barrier experienced by the participants was access to suitable technology necessary for the completion of academic tasks. According to Baijnath (2018), although the majority of South Africans may have access to a mobile phone, this may not be suitable for viewing and downloading educational resources. Thandi spoke to her challenge of working late at night due to her lack of access to the internet, laptop or computer in order to complete her academic work:

...I didn't have a laptop until now. So, it was also difficult...I would always have to come to campus to do my work, even if it was late at night, I would have to come. So that was challenging for me. Uhm, what else, access to internet and stuff, it was difficult in that instance...(Thandi)

Similarly, Mary spoke about difficulties with accessing the internet in order to complete her academic work and explained how this impacted her studies:

...I didn't have internet access at home. So, I had to come to school and get internet access...and then if you're getting a modem, data runs out. When you have access to websites like Jstore, I couldn't access it with my personal computer, I could only

access it when I was using the computers here at school. So those two years were hectic...(Mary)

When speaking on the lack of access to resources of disadvantaged students, Sipho referred to the stark difference in academic experiences of White students and Black students. He used the example of access to resources to highlight the disparities amongst students:

...I realise that when it comes to the same, you know, things that could be basic to White kids, for example, when you know how to use a computer, knowing how to write properly and all of that...that makes it challenging for you be efficient. If I just come into the system knowing what I was supposed to know, I think I would've done better. (Sipho)

When speaking about access to resources, Busi spoke to her privilege of having certain resources that assisted her in university. She also reflected on the negative experiences she witnessed with other disadvantaged students who had limited access to resources, such as having a laptop, prior to university when she asserted:

...my dad had a laptop so I could play around with it, and when I got here I knew how to type, I knew what to do. Some people, when I was doing FYE, I would encounter children that don't even know what a mouse is. And then now because you don't know those things you get scared, like you're not going to be in the social circle. You're not going to tell anyone that I actually cannot type and you need to submit an essay typed...I knew students from model C schools, when we'd have those tasks where you have to type and whatever, someone would spend like 15 minutes and be like "I'm done, can I leave?", then there's someone who's still waiting for me to say well this is what you have to do, this is how you switch on a computer and this is how you type. (Busi)

Her account highlights the norm amongst disadvantaged students when speaking of access to resources. When the participants were asked to comment on the challenges that they

faced at university, most commented on difficulty with sourcing resources. Busi expressed her struggle of acquiring textbooks and how it made it harder for her to complete her academic work:

Uhm, well not having textbooks, like the required textbooks...In first year I was doing English, so we needed to have a novels...and most of the times I never had them...So, uhm, when we had assignments, I had to come borrow books at the library and sometimes they had like two copies and people borrowed them, and then now I would be left without. And then I have to find other means. Also, uhm, resources have been like the biggest things, not having things...(Busi)

The lack of materials needed to support the learning process is thus seen as a barrier in higher education. This lack of access to resources necessary for the academic progression of students, was mentioned by the participants as an important factor which negatively impacted their academic success.

Transport

Since the participants came from a socio-economically disadvantaged background, having access to a car was seen as a privilege. The City of Johannesburg (2015) as cited in Monakali (2015) found that an increasing number of students who attend tertiary institutions looked for student accommodation close to the university they attended. This increase in students searching for closer accommodation to university is attributed to the cost of using public transport and the struggle of commuting daily from home to university. Mary spoke to how using public transport impacted her university experience:

So, first and second year I wasn't staying at res. So, I had to travel and use public transport. So, that was very strenuous. I felt very isolated during those two years cause I feel like it's harder to build relationships when you just come in and then as soon as class ends you go back home. It's different when you're staying at res, then you get to interact with the people after class. So, I felt isolated...(Mary)

She therefore highlighted the negative emotional and interpersonal impact of using public transport. Mary further went on to express in detail how her transport routine affected her academic motivation:

So, in first and second year when I was staying at home, I had to use the metro bus. Fortunately, in first year you have morning classes at 08:00. So, you catch the earliest bus which is around 06:00 and after 07:00 there is no buses. So, sometimes I had to get here super early... I feel like it is exhausting by the time you get to school. Traveling is exhausting. Then you have to stay in class...by the time you get home you're tired and there is work you need to do...So, transport, it really did play a factor. I'm not going to lie...(Mary)

Mary also spoke to the emotional and physical exhaustion associated with using public transport as a student. Musa also expressed experiencing this same strain when using public transport in his undergraduate years:

...the experience for I think undergrad, first year was quite hectic...I had to readjust having to wake up in the early hours of the morning, take a train because I can't afford a taxi, just to go to school. It was something else hay, and worst case, I didn't have a laptop by that time, so I had to leave home around 05:00 to get to Wits at around 07:00, 07:30 to type. (Musa)

He further made reference to his struggle of not having a laptop, which impacted on the time he had to leave home to arrive at university. His assertion highlights the intersectional nature of the higher education challenges that the participants experienced. They demonstrated how transport has an influences academic achievement and engagement in higher education. Students further have endure high tuition costs which further added to their financial burden.

University Support

The absence of interaction and integration between students and the university staff is said to contribute to student drop out (Tinto et al.,1993). When students were asked to

comment on the level of support they have received from the university, they had differing responses and opinions. Thapelo expressed his view in this way “In some cases, Yeah, not in all cases. I would base this on myself and maybe experiences I’ve had...You can argue the range of support and what not. But it’s not fully supportive” (Thapelo). He therefore makes reference to how students subjectively experience support from the university. Lerato also expressed her viewpoint when she said:

I remember they always tell you to reach out to the student advisor or student officer...but when you actually do...they’re not there for you at all. I remember my mom and I walking the corridors knocking on everybody’s door, like “Can you please help us, we’ll make a way. I don’t know just give us some relief?” and there’s literally no one. They always say that there’s structures put in place for students when they’re struggling but when you want to utilise them, when you seek help, they’re just like “Oh you know you’re one of many and there’s nothing you can do. There’s just so many of you guys”. (Lerato)

Other students attested to being assisted by university structures/programmes, student bodies or other organisations within the university system, when facing dire challenges. Busi expressed that after her father had passed away, she found assistance through the Student Representative Counsel (SRC). She asserted “Even when I didn’t have res, I went to the SRC and they offered me a place at Dunwell” (Busi). When she was further asked how her university experiences have impacted on her academic success, she made reference to university resources that assist students, highlighted the university’s support:

...there are nice things about Wits, and also the fact that most of the resources that you need, you find them on campus to do your work. So, I feel like that like I can stay on campus all night and study and that can help me out to get like a distinction...Also at junction [res] they had this thing where if you get a distinction, you get to go to the academic dinner where you get a certificate of achievement...(Busi)

Busi’s assertions therefore highlighted positive experiences of university support.

Tutors and Academic Mentors. Two students spoke to the support they experienced with tutors or academic mentors at the university. Musa expressed the assistance he received from one of his academic tutor:

...Bianca, this one like really helped a lot. Like she became like a tutor and academic mentor in a way for just that course specifically. She was literally always there, and she even went outside the boundaries...she was like "What is it that you want to do, like what is the end goal?...she was able to say, "You know what I'm going to lead you to the relevant people to help you out and get a clear idea of exactly what you want because I feel like you got a lot of potential". (Musa)

Themba also expressed gratitude for his academic mentor who assisted him along his academic journey and spoke to the value of having an academic mentor in university, when he said:

...Certainly...I mean I probably would've been able to find out about what is require about postgrad but having someone who does not just tell you where but gives you tips, and someone who you're able to go to whenever you feel like okay, I need some sort of understanding or assistance with a particular concept...I benefit from knowing her...my textbooks from this year, she had electronic copies for them so I didn't have to spend R5000 on textbooks that I was just going to use for a year...It's quiet resourceful having her as some sort of mentor...(Themba)

Themba therefore emphasised the value of having an academic mentor and how his mentor contributed to his attainment of academic success.

Lecturers and Academic Staff. Previous research has found a positive correlation in the interpersonal relationships between students and their lecturers, an element that determines their academic success (Palaniandy, 2014). Therefore, the level of support of lecturers contributes to academic success. Participants however had different views and experiences with lecturers. Reneilwe spoke of her positive experiences with the lecturers within her discipline:

Uhm, my lecturers, especially in the department that I am in, they're very helpful.

They, call and ask if you're fine. They're not after your academic, academic success only, because they know how demanding university is. So, they ask...about mental sanity, where I am...just my emotional being... (Reneilwe)

Ndumiso also spoke of experiences of positive support experienced from lecturers:

... Uhm, some of my lecturers would go to people...who had failed because they didn't have laptops or were excluded. When you are submitting late...then you would manage to submit, then the next day we are back, and we're doing the same course and they still allow you to submit. Uhm, so in that regard...I would say that the University is quite helpful. (Ndumiso)

However, other students attested to having negative experiences with their lecturers. Mbali further expressed negative experiences with lecturers on her academic journey:

...I don't think we get that much of an academic support...from lecturers...cause with them they just have to do what they have to do. So, I wouldn't say that they have contributed in any way. They have only contributed in teaching and that's it. That's the only influence that they have had. (Mbali)

Through her assertions, Mbali's frustrations are brought to the fore. However, even though some students expressed their dissatisfaction with the support offered by their lecturers, Thandi had an alternative viewpoint:

...I mean obviously a lecturer won't know when you're struggling with until you let them know. But I think sometimes maybe a lecturer needs to be able to identify some students...and maybe reach out as well, and that does not happen. So, if you don't speak, it's like done. And a lot of us don't speak about our issues because we don't want the lecturer to look down on us as well, you know... (Thandi)

Other students also attested to the impact of staff members on their academic journeys.

Mary mentioned a helpful supervisor who provided guidance, when she said "...I went to see that lady, that supervisor. Yah at Humanities, and then she helped me. Like she advised me.

Like I can take this and take that, and I was like okay why didn't I know about this..." (Mary). Mary further added "...I think maybe the resources are there to help you. It's just that we don't utilise them" (Mary). She therefore highlighted students' ignorance to the support and encouragement available. Themba echoed a similar viewpoint:

...the encouragement is there, it's just that people need to grab it. I think I'm one of the people that did not grab the opportunity...because I've grown up being independent and finding some sort of way to succeed on my own...I do think that there is structures put in place...it's just that students are reluctant to go for such opportunities...(Themba)

He also spoke to the opportunities for support available, and the lack of initiative among students. Musa similarly stated:

Uhm, I feel like Wits does try to encourage you. It does do that a lot...That's the one thing I give back to Wits...They can turn someone who's more determined and focused to be a better student. So, it becomes an issue of the individual. If you there and you don't want to properly sit down and focus on your books, you won't actually get there. But if you're going to get there and be like no, I'm availing myself into the experience of being encouraged and being mentored and being like exposed to different ways...to be more motivated, more committed in doing better in your studies. (Musa)

Their assertions therefore pose the question of whether students were taking initiative in seeking assistance from the university's support structures or if these structures are inaccessible to students.

Mental Health

The university is not only a place for educational advancement, but a resource for promoting student well-being (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). However, in recent years mental health has emerged as an issue of concern amongst university students (Makoni, 2016). The participants all spoke to the influence of their mental health on their

academic studies and their motivation to study. Sipho commented on these challenges when he said “Uhm, mental health. Yes, that’s the biggest challenge and it’s one thing that I’m dealing with now. Mental health is a major challenge, but I think it’s also stemming from the fact that you have so many responsibilities right” (Sipho). Sipho expressed the challenge of mental health amongst students, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. He mentioned how these students face various responsibilities and highlighted the impact of these responsibilities on their mental health. Themba further expressed his concern on student mental health:

...there’s always students who get so overwhelmed that they believe taking their lives is the only way out, which is really painful...

Like I feel like students drink the most out of the whole population because we go through a lot, like we go through the most...(Themba)

Like Themba, Mbali also expressed her awareness of the vast emotional challenges experienced by students. She said, “I think...emotional challenges that one experiences, like family problems, the death of family members, eventually contribute to what a person can actually do in school...” (Mbali). A few participants expressed how personal experiences affected their mental health, and their academic performance. Busi shared her experience:

Uhm well when I started varsity my dad was still alive but that was like just for two weeks and then the third week, he passed away...

...But the fact that my dad passed away, it like drew me back. I wasn’t very free to talk to people. I would go to class, get the notes if there’s notes and then from there, I just go back to my place...

...In my third year one of lecturers, she was like no you need to go and see someone. You need to talk to some. (Busi)

There is therefore an awareness amongst students on the emotional challenges experienced whilst at university. Lerato succinctly expressed this awareness:

...Just dealing with the ups and downs of life, when one minute you can be really good, the next you know life just throws you a huge spanner in the works. So, I think dealing with that on top of also going to school is a lot... (Lerato)

Although the participants shared of their own mental health experiences and emotional challenges during university, some students also shared of their frustrations with the university's response to student mental health. Siphos expressed this frustration when he said "...I mean how many cases of people who've died by suicide, who every time when they died, the university keeps saying, oh we'll come back...we will research and investigate, and we never hear anything..." (Siphos). He therefore expressed the frustration with the lack of intervention or response witnessed by the university on the issue of student mental health. Nearly all universities in South Africa offer counselling services to students. Counsellors who work in higher education institutions offer their professional skills and understanding of the academic difficulties experienced in the educational context (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). The University of the Witwatersrand offers Wit's students access to The Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU), where students can receive services such as personal counselling, support groups, career counselling and even graduate recruitment programmes by professionals. Mary spoke to her experience of attending sessions at CCDU:

...So, this year I went actually to CCDU...So, I went and asked to be booked in as well to see someone...then I went there for a couple of sessions and I was like its actually not that bad. ...It was a good experience, and in my mind I was like, why didn't I go. Like it just helped talking about it. (Mary)

However, with regard to her mental health challenges, Busi spoke to the inadequate service she experienced at CCDU:

They say that you must go to CCDU and whatever but when you get there it's either you going to find there's a back log and a lot of people that need the same help that

you need. So you're not going to get it like immediately. So I'll say it has been like hard. (Busi)

There were varying accounts of experiences of psychological services at CCDU. Some students stated the importance of students taking care of their mental health through speaking to others. Thandi emphasised this:

...I believe in taking care of myself. So, when I feel overwhelmed, I will definitely take a step back and...I am very vocal with the people in my immediate circle, so I do speak to them and they help me through those things...(Thandi)

Through these accounts, the participants emphasised the need for student mental health care in higher education.

Social Support

Social support refers to one's social network including friends, family and the community (such as social clubs or churches). Having friends, family and community members to turn to in times of need assists in fostering healthy coping strategies and in providing support. Social support improves one's wellbeing and it further shields one from undesirable circumstances. It further aids in the reduction of stress and anxiety whilst creating a sense of belonging, security, and community.

Friendships

According to Werner (1997) young people place their trust on friends who are able to offer them emotional refuge. The association with their friends may enable to gain perspective on their emotional experiences and their academic experiences. The impact of friendships on students' educational journeys was expressed by the participants. Having social support, especially friends, were described to positively influence and impact students' academic journey and coping strategies in university. Themba spoke to the influence of his friends on his academic journey:

...no definitely. My friends played a role in my University career and success. Uhm, obviously you can't be studying 24/7 or doing schoolwork 24/7. So those casual

weekends when we would chill, we would always come together to debrief and complain about how overwhelmed we were feeling about how tough University is...So, having social circles is definitely beneficial because you get to not think, switch off your academic brain to just be you...in a casual setting...(Themba)

His statement explains the impact of his friendships on his university experience and the impact and positive influence these friendships had on his coping ability. Busi adds on to explain how her friendships formed at an on-campus residency positively impacted on her academic journey:

And are there any significant individuals at University...that played a role in your journey to academic success?

...My friends who also stayed at junction because we had like study sessions all the time and we really spoke. Like we could have times where we could chill and cook...
...I have quite a lot of friends who actually study as well...So, my social circle is around University. (Busi)

Busi thus emphasised the importance of friendships in the university space.

A different perspective is seen in Mary's response, when speaking to the absence of her friendships when she stayed a year behind, she said "...The people I had made friends with had moved on to another, they were a year ahead of me. So, now when there's assignments or when I've misses out on information, who am I going to talk to?..." (Mary). Through Mary's response, the need for friendships and connection is seen as an important aspect in dealing with the pressures of university and in one's academic journey. Positive friendships allowed for the creation and maintenance of emotional distance from academic pressures, stress and challenges. Lerato also expanded on her awareness of the impact and influence of friendships whilst completing higher education qualifications:

What do you think helped you to continue progressing? So, to keep going?

I think uhm, support, emotional support...A good friend group as well. I always preach that you cannot get through varsity without a good group of friends that are

there for you and that lighten the mood for you. That you know that they are there for you to vent to. Uhm, so yeah, definitely a good group of friends...(Lerato)

She went on to elaborate on the negative impact friends can have on one's academics and how to balance this form of social support with academic pressures:

...There's obviously a time where you have to buckle down and you have to tell them for those whole two weeks, "I really can't, like don't invite me anywhere, like I really need to focus on this." But there really does come a point where you need to just break away, clear your mind...(Lerato)

The negative impact that friends may have on one's academic achievement was also expressed by Mary as she spoke to her struggle to balance her academics, social life and university experience:

...I also feel like that's what affected me... I had to find a balance with dating and going out, something I hadn't done before. And also balancing my studies...I also don't want to miss out on the University experience...I didn't do my work up to my utmost best because it was just a matter of me saying, okay...let me just submit. And finding the balance between that and a social life...I'm glad I didn't end up failing entirely cause I'd get excluded...getting that social life came at a cost because it added more years. (Mary)

She therefore raised the negative impact and influence that friends and other relationships, can have on academic achievement. In combating such influences, Mbali explained how she learnt to manage all the demands she faced as a student:

...That environment of constantly being with friends and whatever, it did impact on my studies but over time I've found it much easier to cope with. Like, I've found a way to handle all those things so that it does not affect my academics. So, yes, I still do party and everything, but it doesn't affect my work cause I would probably do it after a submission or after a test...developing that strictness with yourself is very important. (Mbali)

Therefore, the balance of friends and academic studies is crucial in attaining academic success. However, it is seen through these students' accounts that this balance is somewhat challenging. Overall, the students expressed that friendships and social support were important in dealing with academic pressures and coping in higher education.

Community Support

Community support is the coming together of individuals who act as sources of support for community members. It may refer to the presence of social organisation in providing adequate and healthy human development (Garmezy, 1991). It therefore makes reference to businesses and establishments, childcare facilities, community organisations, religious institutions, and sporting and entertainment facilities that provide for the community's human needs (Wang et al., 1993). Musa explained how various individuals from his community assisted him in discovering his academic passion and in pursuing his studies in psychology:

And why is it that you chose to study this qualification that you're currently completing?

So, I recall in my last year of primary school, Uhm I was sent to...like one of my lecturers picked it up and was like no I think you have this ability to talk to people and people are just able to listen to you...So, they sent me to a training camp. In this training camp I was trained to be a peer educator, so peer counsellor in a way. So, I had to come back to school, become maybe a change agent for the school. If ever some students are not doing well, I need to be there as some kind of support. Same thing...I think it went to word of recommendation when I went to my secondary school...So with this also, I went to Love Life just to pursue it further ...So, Love Life exposed me to many people doing psychology. So, in a way they showed me in the direction to say... "There's something called psychology in which you should go and study." So, after that I took it further. (Musa)

Musa highlighted the impact of the involvement of others (community members, teachers, organisations) in propelling a student towards academic achievement. Thus, the positive influence of his teacher contributed to him having an interest in psychology, and those that worked at Love Life further encouraged him to continue pursuing his studies. Therefore, these community members all impacted and contributed to his academic success. This behaviour further encouraged Musa to give back to the same community to nurture and motivated him:

...I chair a few positions around different organisation like Controversa. Then Positive Things South Africa – I also got a position there. Basically, I do a lot to give back to my community and I do a lot to make sure that maybe the youth in my community are able to, kind of reap the benefits...I also advocate for many things. (Musa)

This not only shows the positive impact of community for a student, but demonstrates a reciprocal cycle, where community members benefit from the investment of other community entities. Therefore, community support acted as a positive influence for students, in equipping them to progress academically.

Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities are activities that are undertaken by students outside of the academic environment, which may include sports, student clubs or programmes and community organisations. Existing research has shown that the participation in extracurricular activities is beneficial for students (Morris, 2019). When speaking to importance of extracurricular activities, Sipho said:

Uhm, look I think one has to go beyond the university system. You want to ensure that you do other things, that you become involved... For me, when I realised I could participate in things that I'm taught about in class but also implement them beyond theory...If I look at what I've achieved now...I'm still at school but I've done quite a bit...It makes me a stronger candidate when it comes to funding opportunities...(Sipho)

His assertion highlights the importance for students to engage in activities outside the university, that will benefit their academic journey. He further stated that it is an advantage if these activities are in line with your academic course as it allowed one to gain experience whilst being involved and participating in extracurricular activities. Themba spoke to more specific activities that he undertook:

Uhm, yoh I used to do a lot, especially undergrad and honours. I played tennis and hockey during undergrad and I joined the Wits choir which I'm still part of up until today. It's incredible that I've been there since first year. Uhm, I work at the planetarium on weekends. Uhm, I've joined several societies and I've served on the executive committees of these societies. Uhm, yeah, so I've always...so my philosophy has been that I can't just have academics to deal with. (Themba)

He therefore referred to extracurricular activities that can be pursued at university. He also expressed a need to balance his academic studies and extracurricular activities. Other activities that were mentioned by the participants included exercise and other forms of sport, which assisted them in coping with academic pressures. Busi expressed her interest in exercising:

...I gym quiet a lot. Like exercising and taking km runs or whatever. My mind comes back, and I get the time to actually think while running. Then by the time I come back, I'm like "okay I can actually do this!" ...(Busi)

She therefore highlighted the positive influence of extracurricular activities as a coping strategy on her academic journey. Lerato further made reference to other hobbies or activities that helped her cope with the pressures and demands of her course, when she said:

...I watch a lot of series. I listen to a lot of music. I think having a balance is very good because burn out is a real thing being a student. I'm sure you know as well. So, having that constant balance or trying to switch off. Like as hard as it gets, as

anxious as you get, you need time to switch off. So yeah, reminding myself to switch off has really helped me a lot. (Lerato)

Lerato made reference to student activities such as watching series or listening to music, which assisted her in coping with academic stress. These activities were seen to positively influence the participants' experiences as coping strategies that alleviated the stressors they faced.

Faith and Spirituality

Faith and spirituality was expressed as an influencing factor in students achieving academic success. The participants expressed that their religious practices such as praying and going to church, and also traditional ancestral worship, were instrumental contributors in shaping who they are. According to Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011) religiosity is an independent variable affecting academic achievement. Relationships with a religious community also act a protective factor (Wang et al., 1993, as cited in Masten et al., 1990). Therefore, faith and spirituality provided participants with stability and meaning in times of academic hardship. Mbali expresses how her faith and spirituality has contributed to her academic success:

Would you say your church motivates you or plays a role in your academic success?

Yeah definitely...I've come to believe that this is my purpose in life through church and everything. I've come to believe that me studying and me completing my honours and everything is where God wants me to be. So, yah. I've come to have that belief, so it has influenced me a lot. (Mbali)

Her assertions shed light on the value she placed on her faith and how it contributed to her academic success. Faith and spirituality was also seen to support students through stressful circumstances. When Reneilwe was asked what helps her cope with the demands of her course, she explained "...in my phone I have alarms that tell me, okay now it's prayer time. I have to read my Bible..." (Reneilwe). She therefore spoke directly to the value of her faith in assisting her to move through the higher education. Similarly, Thapelo expressed that when

having to deal with the stress of lack funding, and when asked what he would do the remaining months of the year to acquire funding and to finish his course, he responded to say “I’m a Godly person...Prayer. I’m someone who’s very spiritually dedicated” (Thapelo). This highlighted how his spiritual faith impacted on his motivation levels and enabled him to keep progressing despite experiencing challenges during his higher educational years. A similar view was presented by Ndumiso:

...I mean God has really been good to me. Trust God. Uhm, so funds...I don’t have funds, but I know that if I decide that this is what I want to do, fo sho God will come through for me. (Ndumiso)

He echoed a similar motivation as Thapelo in expressing his faith and his belief that God would assist him navigate challenges in his academic journey. Lerato further elaborated on how her faith and spirituality afforded her the opportunity to acquire a higher education qualification and was the cornerstone of her academic journey. She said “...It was so discouraging. The thing is, I only got here basically by the grace of God” (Lerato).

Religion and spirituality were perceived to positively influence the academic experiences of students and provide stability and create meaning to their academic journeys. Alternatively, Musa spoke to his spirituality when he mentioned “...Uhm, I currently work outside as a traditional help practitioner, like inyanga...as a traditional healer. So, that’s something which I do on the side” (Musa). Therefore, participants revealed different types of spirituality which influenced the academic experiences of students. Therefore, faith and spirituality were seen to positively impact on the academic achievement of the participants. In sum, social support positively influenced students’ academic journeys and in the attainment of academic success. Thandi expressed this as follows:

Honestly, and I always say this to everyone else, support is very essential. It is the difference between someone sitting in their room and crying out and someone committing suicide and not communicating. Cause when you know that you have

people in your corner that are routing for you and that genuinely have your best interest at heart, it drives you and pushes you...(Thandi)

Conclusion

The findings and discussion chapter aims to understand and explore the experiences of disadvantaged postgraduate students in their attainment of academic success. This chapter presented the experiences, perceptions and viewpoints of these students, which fell into four broad themes, namely family background, motivation, factors influencing academic achievement and social support. The participants were aware of the role of these factors in their academic success and their impact on their academic journeys.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Taking into consideration the findings presented in the previous chapter, this chapter consolidates the four broad themes which were seen to influence the academic success of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students at the University of the Witwatersrand. This chapter therefore highlights these major themes in order to understand the experiences of higher education of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students.

Family Background

The home environment was seen to be an important predictor of students' academic achievement. The postgraduate students expanded on their family structures and living conditions. Most students spoke of their experiences of not currently living with their families at home but rather living in on campus and off-campus accommodation. Often, higher education institutions are located far from students' homes and transport is usually expensive to commute daily to university, therefore students often live in student accommodation on or near campus (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). This is particularly relevant to Black disadvantaged students whose home environments may be located within rural areas or on the outskirts of urban areas. All the postgraduate students interviewed spoke to their experiences of living in township residential areas. Students further expanded on their living environment, where most students commented on living with extended family members, grandparents, aunts/uncles and cousins. According to Dass-Brailsford (2005), various families in South Africa live with extended family members. What was even more common was the assertions of students describing how they were raised and are still being taken care of by their grandparents, emphasising the common tradition of grandparents acting as primary caregivers for students during their educational journeys. Their accounts of their home environments further highlighted the link seen between their family's socio-economic status relating to the economic, social and cultural resources available, and their living conditions or home environments. Emphasising that the home environment, is not

simple to understand and describe due to the unique experiences of South African families (Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

The parental educational backgrounds of these socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students was also seen to be an important influencing factor in the students' attainment of academic success. According to Jones et al. (2008), a student is better prepared and is offered greater support and guidance when their parents have experienced and acquired a higher education qualification. Therefore, emphasising that a parents' education background and social class impact the educational outcomes of students (Perger & Takacs, 2016; Taylor & Gabre, 2016). Thus demonstrating that a parents' education background impacts on students' achievement of students in higher education. However, the findings demonstrate that only two postgraduate students could attest to their parents having acquired a degree or higher education qualification. Therefore further highlighting the education shortfalls brought about by the oppressive apartheid system, where Black learners were subjected to Bantu Education. Many of the Black learners at that time were subjected to a low level of education which impacted their knowledge formation and skills. Other learners dropped out of school and rather found work to alleviate the economic and financial burdens experienced by Black people during apartheid. This too was demonstrated in the findings where students expressed that their parents either did not complete their secondary education or only attained a secondary qualification and no further qualifications. However, a great number of students spoke of their parents acquiring post-secondary qualifications through completing short courses and obtaining certificates or by attending college. Their accounts document the common education journeys of parents from low socio-economic backgrounds. However it also reveals the progressive nature of their parents' educational journeys in acquiring further post-secondary qualification, which corresponds with the transition from pre-1994 Bantu Education to post-1994 and the educational changes and educational transformation witnessed.

Although a higher number of Black students enrol into higher education, the participation rates still reflect the racial inequalities of the past. Therefore most socio-economically disadvantaged students who gain admittance into higher education are first generation students, meaning that their parents did not attend higher education. Three postgraduate students in this study expressed their first-generation student status by stating that they are either the first in their family to attend university, graduate and attain a higher education qualification, or pursue a postgraduate qualification. Of the eleven postgraduate students interviewed, these three students directly spoke to their first-generation student status, however the other students did not make direct reference to being first generation students. However as discussed above, it is seen that parents' experience of university positively influences the experience of students. Most of the parents of postgraduate students in this study did not acquire a higher education qualification or experience university. Therefore, the postgraduate students spoke to their parents failing to support them due to their limited understanding of university and to the value of acquiring a higher education qualification, especially a postgraduate qualification. These students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds therefore lack the academic readiness of higher education and other various characteristics necessary for the successful adjustment to university (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Therefore, the background of many socio-economically disadvantaged students does not afford them the same level of preparedness for higher education as their peers of a higher socio-economic status (Jones et al., 2008). However, it is interesting to note how these three postgraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds were able to overcome the challenges experienced in higher education. Being a first-generation student was therefore mentioned as a symbol of pride and achievement rather than it acting as another barrier to attaining academic success.

More than half of the students expressed that their parents or caregivers were either struggling to find employment or were unemployed during their children's pursuit of higher education. Various students could attest to their parents having acquired employment,

however in most cases their employment and income received was not enough to cover their children's tuition cost, therefore leaving students in financial disarray, which was discussed at length when students spoke to funding and the cost of higher education. According to Cardak and Givon (2004), the parents of socio-economically disadvantaged who either struggle to find employment or those who are unemployed, find it more difficult to access higher education. This lack of sufficient income therefore acts as a barrier in students accessing and continuing through higher education and it further puts pressure on the students to successfully complete higher education and acquire a qualification in order to assist their families financially. This therefore links to the student's assertions of parent's lack of support and understanding when they do not finish in the prescribed time or when students opt to continue their studies and enrol to complete their postgraduate qualifications. This is also discussed at length in the support experienced by students from their families. Therefore the employment status of parents in this study is seen to negatively influence the postgraduate students' attainment of academic success.

The level of support experienced by family members was expressed to influence the postgraduate students' academic journeys. According to Wang et al. (1993) the level of support experienced by parents or caregivers is crucial in one's development of coping skills. Students who experienced positive support explained how their parents support encouraged them to persevere during challenging times during their tertiary education years, and it further motivated them to continue progressing through the years. Parental commitment that provides support and informal counselling, helps students in achieving success (McMillan & Reed, 1993). This level of support was also experienced from aunts, uncles, siblings and stepparents. The postgraduate students also expressed how their parents would encourage them by reminding them of their family's socio-economic status and of their parent's lack of educational opportunities. This form of encouragement further motivated students to academically succeed in order to change their families and their future families economic standing. However, three postgraduate students expressed their parents lack of

understanding to their aspiration to pursue their postgraduate studies. These students expressed the pressure exerted by parents to complete their academic studies in order to financially contribute towards the family. According to Creighton (2007), the lack of support and isolation of the family and parents, does not facilitate learning or bring about positive measures towards student success. One student also expressed the limited support experienced due to his family's lack of experience in higher education. Therefore, it was seen that more focus and attention is placed on academically achieving in order to obtain a degree in order to financially assist the family.

Motivation

Motivation was mentioned to influence students' attainment of academic success and in the completion of their academic studies. Motivation is also acknowledged as a requirement for student engagement and learning (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). As seen in the study, motivation is not simply influenced by the attainment of a desired outcome or due to the need to meet psychological needs. The motivational factors and influences identified and explored were interlinked and have an impact on each other. Therefore emphasising that people differ in their level and type of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). What was also found is that with several postgraduate students interviewed made reference to both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors that contributed to their academic success. Therefore, highlighting that their driving motivation factors were often interconnected due to context and environmental factors. Students who mentioned extrinsic motivational factors expressed that they felt motivated to academically achieve due to the responsibility they felt to assist their family's socio-economic circumstances, to uphold family standards/values and make their parents proud, to change the narrative for future Black students, or to bring about change and reform. These extrinsic factors therefore highlight a student's engagement in tasks due to external reward (Wu, 2019). Students who were intrinsically motivated mentioned factors such as acquiring higher education qualifications due to their passion for academics or for a specific profession, due to their desire to one day become a working professional in their

field of study, due to the perceived fear of failure and failing their families and communities, and due to their internal desire or internal locus of control. According to Wilkesmann et al. (2012), intrinsic motivation is dependent on the relationship between one's feelings of independence, relatedness, and competence.

University Factors Influencing Academic Success

The postgraduate students in this study spoke to various influencing factors that impacted on their attainment of academic success. What was important was to firstly understand how they define academic success, and which factors they attribute to the attainment of academic success. What was found was their varying explanations of academic success which were seen to be influenced by their subjective perspectives and experiences of education or higher education. One student attributed academic success to the attainment of knowledge whilst another student attributed academic success to the attainment of high assessment grades. Therefore, the American Federation of Teachers of Higher Education define student success "as the achievement of the student's own educational goal rather than degree attainment" (Perger & Takacs, 2016, p. 121). One student intriguingly highlighted the categorisation of a specific student in defining academic success without the consideration of contextual factors impacting on what academic success may mean to one student as opposed to another. Literature on learning states that aspects such as student motivation, socio and academic environment and other varying psychosocial factors contribute to a student's ability to attain academic success (Fraser & Killen, 2003). Therefore, in shedding light to contextual factors this student spoke to the differing experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged students as compared to the challenges faced by their peers, further highlighting the various influencing factors discussed within this theme.

When speaking to the university factors influencing academic success, the postgraduate students spoke to their higher education experiences and the challenges they faced in attaining academic success. Also mentioned were the barriers faced by students

who come from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing higher education. The students spoke to their views of how the greater societal structure and social inequalities experienced are reflections of South Africa's past. Even since the abolishment of apartheid in 1994, the country's distribution of wealth is still skewed against Black people, which explains the extreme poverty and unemployment still witnessed (Dass-brailsford, 2005). Therefore, socio-economic status, issues of finance, issues of lack of access to resources and other issues still act as barriers in disadvantaged students, accessing higher education. Thus demonstrating the deep imprints of historical inequality in the country. Some disadvantaged postgraduate students spoke to their experiences with their peers from secondary school and spoke to the issues experienced by their peers which hinder them in accessing higher education. Similarly, students spoke to the level of education received in secondary school and the effect it has on students' preparedness and their struggles of accessing higher education. Therefore, the students mentioned pre-entry challenges witnessed or experienced that have impacted on them accessing higher education or their peers accessing higher education. The gap experienced between high school and university is also caused by the interdependent nature of primary, secondary, and tertiary education (Chetty & Pather, 2015). Therefore emphasising the need for South Africa's educational system to pay attention to primary and secondary schooling as important contributors to reaching its higher education goals (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2019)

Amongst all the postgraduate students, funding and finances were mentioned to be the most prominent contributing factor in their attainment of academic success. Though the cost of higher education may be lower than that of Europe and North America, many students in the country cannot afford higher education as the cost is still far above the average South African household income (Tjønneland, 2017). Students therefore spoke to their funding experiences and to their difficulty in acquiring funding for their tuition costs. They also spoke to the various funding options available such as the Wits Discretionary Fund, bursaries and loans and even spoke to obtaining funding from family members.

However, students document how these avenues of funding were not consistent and how one needs to find multiple funding sources in order to progress over the years in university. The high cost of education in South Africa is therefore supplemented through student loans, parents' income and at times student income (Public Servants Association, 2016). A number of the postgraduate students expressed their gratitude and relief in acquiring Wits Bursaries as well as acquiring jobs at the university in order to cover excess tuition costs. However students still spoke to their experiences of not acquiring funding and the stress and pressure experienced. According to Hlalela (2015) socio-economically disadvantaged students face the challenge of worrying about how they will pay for fees. Therefore, highlighting funding as a unique barrier in students accessing higher education. Further, the accounts of these students in acquiring funding and progressing through the years, were unique and at times unconventional, however what was highlighted repeatedly were the challenges experienced in covering tuition and accommodation costs whilst having to take into consideration external contextual factors impacting on their attainment of tuition funds. Therefore the students' funding experiences reveal complex context specific conditions which impede on their access to funding, which ultimately affects their attainment of academic success in university.

The postgraduate students who were admitted into Wits University experienced several challenges in adapting to higher education. Some students struggled to integrate into the university environment due to their secondary education experiences which did not adequately prepare them for transition into higher education. Students spoke to course and academic writing adjustment issues and previous lack of access to resources which were not made available to them in high school. Other students shared of their social adjustment experiences and struggles in assimilating to the new university culture, and majority of the students spoke to adjusting to the size of lecture halls as compared to their secondary school class sizes. Overall, the postgraduate students spoke to their experiences of facing

social and academic challenges in efforts to successfully integrate into higher education, which also influenced on their academic performance and higher educational experience.

Most of the postgraduate students interviewed expressed their challenge with language, academic jargon or writing skills. Mulisa (2019), states that a students' linguistic background can have an effect on their academic achievement, especially if the course content is not in their mother tongue. Some students came from high schools where they were taught in other South African languages, therefore not fully understanding English or English being their second or third language. Therefore, students spoke of their experiences of having to learn how to communicate with others in English within the university environment. According to Mzangwa (2019), 42% of South Africans speaks an Nguni language as their first or home language. However, there seems to be academic ignorance impact of multilingualism in understanding how to bridge the gap of academic language (Madiba, 2012). Other students also spoke to their language experience which limited their participation in lectures due to their language challenges. Adjusting to academic jargon and the mode of communicating at Wits was also expressed as a challenge, especially understanding and grasping course content which was expressed as challenging. Therefore, language seems to have influenced and impacted on the students' university and in some cases, in their attainment of academic success. Language is therefore said to play a crucial role in the failure rates seen in higher education (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015).

Belonging and interacting with others within the academic environment was seen to impact students' successful integration and assimilation of the postgraduate students into the university environment. This sense belonging provides students with a sense of connectedness and allows for greater support. Peer interaction further provides a context for social and academic adjustment (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Mentioned in this subtheme was the transitional challenge of acquiring friends in university and avoidance of feeling lonely, without support. The formation of meaningful friendships has been shown to influence the academic performance of students (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Therefore, interacting with others

and engaging in meaningful ways can be seen to positively influence one's experience of higher education.

Being a Black student in higher education brings about an awareness to class, race and diversity. The postgraduate students spoke to their experiences of manoeuvring through racial differences, transitioning from high school to university and witnessing disparities in social class and privilege, and other similar experiences which affect Black students' integration and assimilation into higher education. These experiences are seen to emphasise the inequalities still faced by Black students in higher education.

When most of the postgraduate students were asked to comment on the challenges faced at university that impacted on their attainment of academic success, most students commented on their lack of access to resources necessary for their academic progression. Some students shared of their experiences of being exposed to such resources such as a computer or laptop only when they began university. Commonly mentioned were disparities seen amongst Black and White students when the postgraduate students spoke to access to resources. However, much attention was drawn to the issue of access to the internet as students shared of their experiences of leaving university in the late hours in order to have access to these resources. Therefore, the lack of access to adequate resources proved to act as a barrier in obtaining academic success for these postgraduate students.

The use of public transport in commuting from home to university and vice versa, was expressed to negatively impact on engagement and academic performance of the postgraduate students. One student spoke to the negative emotional and interpersonal impact experienced when having to use public transport. What was also emphasised, is the exhaustion experienced in having to wake up early in order to access public transport and to arrive at university early, to complete work or attend the morning class. Also revealed was the intersection of various challenges expressed under the broad theme of university factors influencing academic success, as one student expressed how lack of access to resources

influences transport use. Therefore demonstrating how a variety of factors contribute to the academic achievement of these postgraduate students.

Limited student-lecturer engagement is said to affect students' academic achievement. Mulisa (2019) states that caring teaching, a supportive mentor and a friendly relationship are associated with successful academic outcomes. In higher education, students may seek academic support from a number of institutional bodies such as lecturers, librarians, administrative staff, and tutors. The postgraduate students were asked to comment on the level of support and encouragement experienced by the University. Some students spoke of positive experiences of receiving assistance and support from administrative staff and other universities' entities such as the SRC. Students also mentioned positive experiences of assistance offered by tutors, academic mentors and lecturers. However, other students spoke to the negative support experienced from the same university structures. Therefore, it seems that whether a student views the university and its structures to be supportive or not is based on the subjective experiences of the student. Therefore the findings demonstrate accounts both for and against the university as an institution supporting the needs and struggles of disadvantaged students.

Student mental health was mentioned as an influencing factor to the attainment of academic success. Mental and psychological problems are said to impact on the academic achievement of students leading to poor performance, worry and fear, low self-confidence, and test anxiety (Beharu, 2018). The postgraduate students spoke to their personal mental health experiences and the emotional challenges experienced whilst completing their qualification. According to Mulisa (2019) life circumstances such as parental divorce, death, accidental injury, and disease may also lead to the decline in student mental health and coping abilities. These experiences were seen to negatively influence and affect their academic performance. Students demonstrated awareness into the vast challenges experienced whilst in higher education and shared of their concern on student mental health. Students also shared of their frustration in the engagement of student mental health by the

University of the Witwatersrand. However, some students spoke to their positive experiences of receiving psychological assistance at Wit's counselling centre, CCDU. Yet, a number of students also spoke to the long waiting lists and backlog experienced when accessing services at CCDU. Overall when speaking to student mental health, students spoke to the grave need for attention to be placed on student mental health at the University of the Witwatersrand. Therefore, mental health in higher education remains an issue of concern which is seen to hinder the successful completion of studies of students (Makoni, 2016).

Social Support

Having the support of friends and family, was expressed to positively influence the academic success of the postgraduate students. These individuals expressed to have positively assisted the students in times of crisis and acted as sources for providing healthy coping strategies amidst academic challenges. Friendships were expressed to positively impact on the students' coping ability, academic achievement, their emotional experiences and on their overall academic motivation. According to Taylor and Gebre (2016) the presence and absence of friendships influence students' academic performance. Those students who therefore have a deficit in social capital (the network of relationships among people) are more likely to fall behind academically (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). However the balance of friendships and pursuing a social life, whilst still focusing on their academics, was mentioned to be challenging. Students further mentioned the positive influences of friendships maintained outside the university environment which also impacted their academic journey. Friendships and connections with others were therefore seen to positively impact on the student's capacity to obtain academic success.

Additionally, only one student expressed experiencing support from his community. His assertion demonstrates the impact of the involvement of others in the community on the attainment of academic success of students. Students who feel that they are part of a community are encouraged to enhance their opportunity of attaining academic success, as opposed to those who feel isolated and alone (Jones et al., 2008). Also demonstrated was

the reciprocal nature of investment in individuals by the community and individuals investing back in the community that assisted them. Therefore, community support was seen to positively influence this students' ability to access higher education and in enhancing his educational experiences.

Also mentioned by the students is the positive influence of extracurricular activities during their academic journeys. The postgraduate students expressed the importance of engaging in activities outside the university space, such as being involved in community programmes or volunteering to be part of student clubs, in order to benefit and enhance their experiences and exposure to opportunities. Other students spoke to activities pursued within university, such as joining the Wits choir, playing sport and going to gym, which assisted in coping with the pressures experienced at university. Further majority of the students mentioned activities such as listening to music, watching movies or series and even cooking, to act as measures to assist students in coping with the pressures and stress experienced in their academic journeys. It is shown that involvement in extracurricular activities at school is seen to provide protection for students (McMillan & Reed, 1993) and participating in campus sport and other social activities can assist with their adjustment to the higher education environment (Jones et al., 2008).

Another common positive influence mentioned was the influence of faith and spirituality on the attainment of academic success. According to Dass-Brailsfor (2005) Faith and spirituality is crucial in instilling and sustaining hope as well as in creating meaning making. More than half of the postgraduate students interviewed spoke to the positive influence of their faith and spirituality. Students spoke to the value they place on their faith which has contributed to them attaining academic success. According to Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011), faith and spirituality is seen as an independent variable affecting and influencing academic achievement. Other students spoke to their unique situations and challenges experienced and the influence and impact of their faith in motivating to cope and continue their studies despite the emerging hardships. One student spoke to being a

traditional healer which they pursue. This also contributes as a source of support during their higher education years. Therefore faith and spirituality are seen to affect and positively influence the academic achievement of the postgraduate students and which ultimately contributed to their academic success. Overall, these various sources of social support were seen to act as buffers against adverse life events and were seen to assist the postgraduate students to progress in their studies and contributed to their achievement of academic success.

Conclusion

Limitations of the Research Study

The researcher recognises that there are limitations to the research study which may have impacted the credibility of the results. (1) Due to the global coronavirus pandemic that emerged in 2020, and the national lockdown that started in South Africa in March 2020, the method in which the interviews were conducted were adjusted in order to adhere to the national lockdown regulations. Due to nation limited access and the shutdown of all tertiary institutions, the researcher conducted a number of interviews virtually, on the Zoom platform, and telephonically, using WhatsApp audio call. Participants therefore may not have provided an in-depth reflection of their experiences in higher education. Therefore, face-to-face interview may have provided the participants an opportunity to elaborate on responses, and it further would have allowed the researcher to probe further on responses that were ambiguous. (2) The research study was limited to postgraduate Humanities students at the University of the Witwatersrand (3) A sample size of 11 participants was employed for the study, however this prevents the generalisation of results beyond the sample size. (4) As semi-structured interviews were employed for this study, there were slight variations in the interviews with participants, to allow for greater understanding of the interviewee. These slight variations may have impacted the findings.

Recommendation and Direction for Future Research

This research has highlighted the factors that influence academic success amongst socio-economically disadvantaged students in higher education. Challenges affecting academic success were explored and addressed, and from the findings and conclusions, some recommendations are offered. (1) This research study was restricted to socio-economically disadvantaged students within the Humanities field at the University of the Witwatersrand. Further focus and analysis should be extended to students in other universities in South Africa, to yield different results and alternative student experiences. (2) Future research should further expand the sample size to obtain representation of the population in order for results to be generalised. (3) Further research is crucial in analysing the academic success of student's post-higher education to analyse the impact of these challenges on a wider trajectory. (4) It would be interesting for a study to be conducted on the experiences or challenges of students from higher socio-economic classes to analyse the differences in factors influencing the attainment of academic success in higher education. (5). It is recognised in this study that academic success moves beyond a student ability and academic performance, however it is multifaceted which demands a holistic understanding and approach to student's socio-ecological systems. Therefore, a careful analysis of factors contributing and impacting on students' academic success in higher education is needed, where the impact of social, academic, and institutional structures are analysed. (6) A greater awareness of student demands and challenges in higher education needs to be addressed amongst higher education institutions and education policy makers. This will assist students to better transition and cope with university (including university culture and experience) and better improve students' academic achievement.

Concluding Comment

Through the presentation of findings, it is clear that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds experience a number of challenges that impact the attainment of academic success in higher education. This is due to the result of being poorly equipped during secondary school, the quality of education received prior to attending University, the

cost of higher education, the academic language of instruction, the availability of resources and adjustment issues. These challenges consequently create barriers in accessing higher education, impact students' experiences during higher education, and stunt the academic achievement of socio-economically disadvantaged students. Therefore, a holistic understanding of students is vital in understanding a student's academic performance and ability to attain academic success. Therefore highlighting that the responsibility of student academic success, especially amongst disadvantaged students, should not be solely placed on the university or tertiary institution. However, as seen and discussed using the ecological systems model, students, the family, the community, educators, higher education institutions, educational policy makers, governmental institutional, cultural values, and economic standpoints, all contribute in determining a students' academic success. Therefore a collaborative approach where the various socioecological systems work together in ensuring increased levels of academic success amongst all students in higher education.

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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (SCHOOL OF HUMAN & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: MACC/19/008 1H

PROJECT TITLE:

Exploring the experiences that promote academic success of socio-economically disadvantaged postgraduate students at the University of Witwatersrand.

INVESTIGATORS

Joja Charlotte

DEPARTMENT

Psychology

DATE CONSIDERED

16 May 2019

DECISION OF COMMITTEE*

Approved

This ethical clearance is valid for 2 years and may be renewed upon application

DATE: 16 May 2019

CHAIRPERSON
Dr Vinitha Jithoo)



cc Supervisor:

Prof. Tanya Graham
Psychology

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR (S)

To be completed in duplicate and **one copy** returned to the Secretary, Room 100015, 101h floor, Senate House, University.

I/we fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved, I/we undertake to submit a revised protocol to the Committee.

This ethical clearance will expire on 31 December 2021

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

Biographical Information

- In which course are you currently enrolled in?
- How old are you?
- Where do you reside?
- Are you currently living alone or with family?
- Are your parents employed?
- What occupation do your mother and father have?
- What is the highest level of your parents' education?

Attitudes Towards Tertiary Education

- Describe your higher education experience. Is it what you expected?
- How did you adjust to University?
- Is your course more demanding than what you expected? How?
- What has helped you to continue progressing through your undergraduate years until you graduated?
- How have your university experiences had an impact on your academic success?
- What are some of the influences that have helped you succeed at University?
- What are some of the challenges you faced at University, and how did you overcome those challenges?
- What are your sources of social support at University?
- Are there any significant individuals at University (lecturers, tutors, mentors) that have played a role in your journey to academic success? Please tell me more about your relationship with them?

Economic Factors

- What are some of the reasons that could prevent you from studying further?

- What do you think are the challenges/barriers that you experience in accessing higher education, that may be different to your peers?
- Do you think that other peers coming from the same background as you experience the same challenges as you do?
- Can you afford your tuition fees?
- Who has funded your studies?
- Does this affect your motivation to study further?
- What are your views on the cost of higher education and how does this affect you?
- What are some of the challenges you experience while studying?
- What do you do in your spare time?

Sociocultural Factors and Academic Support

- What would you say about the level of encouragement you receive at University?
- Have you experienced any language difficulties that have impacted on your academic performance?
- In your view, what are the barriers to receiving a higher education qualification?
- Tell me more about your social life away from university (including friends, where you spend your time?)
- How does this influence your commitment to your studies?
- Are there any other commitments you have besides studying?

Family Factors

- Please tell me more about your family background.
- Discuss your support system at home that has influenced your experiences at University and has this had a positive or negative effect on your academic achievement?
- Tell me more about your family that you stay with?

Goal Valuation and Academic Motivation

- Why do you want a Postgraduate tertiary qualification?

- Why did you choose the Qualification that you are currently completing?
- Do you have any plans to further your studies?
- When you lose interest in your modules or when you find it challenging, what do you do to keep your motivated?
- What strategies do you employ to help cope with the demands of your course? How do you implement them?

Appendix C



PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)



Participant Information Form

Hello,

My name is Charlotte Joja, and I am currently conducting research for my master's degree in Community-Based Counselling Psychology at the University of Witwatersrand. This study explores the experiences of postgraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been able to attain academic success. Therefore, this study will focus on your experiences of studying at the University of Witwatersrand, and further uncover the mechanism that have contributed in you achieving academic success. This research is required for the successful completion of my master's degree in Community-Based Counselling Psychology, and I would thus like to invite you participate in this research study.

Participation in this study will involve an in-depth semi-structured interview. This interview will be conducted at the University of Witwatersrand (at the Emthonjeni Centre) during a day and time that is most convenient for you. The duration of this interview will last a period of one hour, maximum. During the interview session, you will be asked questions about your personal life story relating to educational, family and social history. This will assist in understanding you're your unique academic experience and how this has affected your academic achievement, and it will further assist in exploring how you make sense of your personal background and position in society in relation to your academic achievement.

During the interview, some discomfort may arise when answering some questions. For this reason, where necessary, psychological assistance in the form of referrals for counselling/ therapy will be made available to you. This will further assist and help you to

cope with unresolved feelings and emotions. In addition, if you feel any distress at any time during the session, we will stop the process until you are ready to continue. Further, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to offer any explanation. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you may not feel comfortable to address. Therefore, your participation in this study is voluntary and warmly welcomed.

The information you present during the interview, is of utmost value and importance. Therefore, it is important to ensure that everything you express, and state is not misconstrued or misunderstood. For this reason, I would like to request your permission to use an audio recorder during our interview to further aid in the successful and accurate write-up of the research report. Once we have completed this interview, your audio recording will be stored in a password protected laptop, which will be kept safe. A third-year psychology student will transcribe these audio recordings for the successful analysis of the information obtained. It is important to note that your identity will be protected by myself (the researcher), the transcriber and my research supervisor, at all times. Your transcript will use a fake name for the protection of your identity. Therefore, even in the write-up of this report where the researcher uses direct speech, a fake name will be employed. Confidentiality will always be maintained throughout the interview process and as well as after your interview, when data is being transcribed and analysed in the research report. Therefore, a document of confidentiality will thus also be signed by me (the researcher), my supervisor and the transcriber to ensure we preserve confidentiality. Only myself, my supervisor, and the transcriber, will have access to the audio tapes and after my supervisor and I are satisfied that the information has been captured correctly, will the tapes be kept as University property.

After the completion of the research report (if you do decide to participate in this study) you will be given a summary of all the findings, and a full research report will be made available to you on request. In taking part in this research, we hope to further understand the facilitators of academic success during tertiary years. This will assist in enriching theoretical

or teaching understanding and further assist in guiding forthcoming students from disadvantaged backgrounds to implement similar strategies in order to attain academic success.

I am available for questions and queries. My information is below. Your participation will be greatly appreciated. You are welcome to contact me directly or alternatively contact my supervisor using the details below.

Ms. Charlotte Joja

073 976 5851

charlottenjoja@gmail.com

Prof. Tanya Graham

011 717 8330

Tanya.graham@wits.ac.za

Appendix D



PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)



Consent Form for Participation in Study

I, _____ hereby agree to participate in Charlotte Joja's research study on the experiences of academic success among disadvantaged postgraduate students.

- Participation in this study is voluntary.
- Refusal to participate will not involve any penalty.
- I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons why.
- The information I provide will not be traced back to me and my identity will not be disclosed in any report, presentation, or other forms of distribution.
- I understand that fake names will be used to protect my identity.
- No information that may identify me will be used in the research report. While direct speech from the interview will be included in the researcher's research, the researcher will keep all responses as nameless as possible.

I understand that there will be no direct benefit for me in participating in this study and that there are no potential risks involved. I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet. My questions about participation in this study have been answered satisfactorily. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant

Date

Appendix E



PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)



Consent Form for Interview

I, _____, hereby consent to being interviewed by Charlotte Joja's for her study on the experiences of academic success among disadvantaged postgraduate students.

I understand that:

- Participation in this interview is voluntary.
- That I may refuse to answer any questions I would prefer not to.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.
- No information that may identify me will be in the research report, and my responses will remain confidential.
- There are no individual risks and benefits.
- My direct quotes could be used in the written report.

Participant

Date

Appendix F



PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)



Consent Form for Audio Recording

I, _____, hereby give consent for the interview (described in the information sheet attached) by Charlotte Joja to be audio-recorded, with the full understanding that:

- The audio recording will be heard by no other than the researcher, the transcriber and the supervisor.
- All audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as they have been fully transcribed.
- Transcripts will be destroyed after the completion of the research and after the qualification has been obtained.
- The recordings will be securely stored by a password protected laptop by the researcher.
- No identifying information will be used in the transcripts or the research report.
- Pseudonyms/false names will be used to identify different participants to maintain privacy.
- I further give consent to the researcher, Charlotte Joja, to use direct speech that will not have any identifying information.

Participant

Date