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Student organisations and university experiences at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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1. Introduction

South Africa experienced a regime by the name of Apartheid during the years 1948 – 1993 (Bond, 2003). This regime suppressed the rights of the majority 'non-white' population and maintained a rule of the white minority (Bond, 2003). This system followed colonial rule in the country which dated back to the late 1800s. Guided by the stewardship of the African National Congress and its alliance partners, South Africa, through various means, managed to emerge from this segregationist and brutal system to enter into a democratic dispensation in 1994.

However, today the legacies of apartheid and colonisation in South Africa continue to have a major impact in all spheres of life. Today's students in particular, while not the direct victims of apartheid, continue to bear the brunt of the results of this divisive system of governance. This is done through a poor educational legacy which affects all students who tend to be unprepared for university but this is exacerbated for the students who come from schools from disadvantaged backgrounds (SASCO, 2010).

There are many other challenges that students in higher education face. These include the lack of resources available to students especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, pressures to perform, workload, financial difficulties, and accommodation problems (NSFAS, 2010). South African students, therefore, face a myriad of challenges at university. As a result, university life can be stressful (Letseka & Maile, 2008) found that less than half of students who register in South African universities graduate (Harvard, 2010). This may be attributable to the various stressors in student life.

Student life can also be highly rewarding. Higher education provides greater career prospects, in many cases it assists students in building self confidence, independence and responsibility

and gives individuals the opportunity to pursue a vocation (Cardfiff, 2010). Further, higher education can also provide an enriching and satisfying social environment for students.

One of the key factors that may influence student experiences of university is membership and involvement in student organisations. The current research attempts to understand student experiences of university. This is with particular reference to students actively involved in student organisations. Sense of community and stress are used as background and contextual variables. Research suggests that these two variables play a pertinent role in the lives of students (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003; Rovai, 2002). As such, the study will be looking at the experiences of students of students in student organisation and also the impact of their participation in terms of fitting into and dealing with university life. The following section is a review of relevant literature on student organisations, sense of community and stress, respectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student Organisations

Student organisations play a significant role in the lives and experiences of students (Meyer, 2004). Many of these organisations seek to advance sense of togetherness, social support and intra-group learning through developmental programmes. For example, a political student formation, the South African Students Congress (SASCO) runs continuous programmes that advocate for academic excellence. At the same time, the organisation challenges the status quo of higher education and advocates for greater access, redress and success in universities through systematic policy reform. Student organisations also offer students an opportunity to express their identities and their aspirations (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Student organisations

engage in a number of student-led and student-focused initiatives to further whatever goals that they have as a student organisation.

Research shows that student involvement in university structures is a central part of learning (Miles, Miller & Nadler, 2008). It was found that universities become more effective with the involvement of students in governance and that has a positive impact on learning of students. Furthermore, student involvement in student organisations has a central role to play in dealing with factors in student life that may negatively impact individual students (Buettner, Andrews & Glassman, 2009). Student organisations exist on the premise that students will be offered an opportunity to be involved with the life of their institution and therefore may play a central role in engendering a sense of community amongst students. Indeed, Bell, Kerksiek and Watson (2009) assert that student initiatives have a link with higher levels of sense of community. Moreover, sense of community has been shown not only to have a positive influence on increasing students' persistence in academic work but has also been shown to increase flow of information amongst students, increase the availability of support and increase the level of commitment to group goals (Rovai, 2002). Students with a low sense of community are likely to display class cutting behaviour and contemplate the idea of dropping out (Rovai, 2002). Such students have also been found to be less inclined to report feeling bad when unprepared for lectures.

Despite the role of student organisations potentially being very important in the lives of students, researchers have done relatively little work on their role and impact. Some research that does exist includes the work of Douglas (2003) which studied the role of African American student organisations in social integration. Douglas (2003) found that students need formal and informal integration into their institutions and that African American student organisations played a central role in such integration. Similarly, Astin (1999) studied the role of student organisations in higher education. Astin (1999) found that students play a

central role in the direction and form of higher education particularly if there are channels of communication and engagement and they are treated as an important stakeholder. Much research on student organisations has been studied from a sociological perspective. Much of the research looks at the broad patterns of society without analysing the relationship with the individual cognitive experiences. This is also indicated by the two research examples I have just discussed. Also, it cannot go unnoticed that there is some attention, especially from research in America, on black students and student organisations that cater for black students and other minority groups. Girffrida and Douthit (2010), for example, studied black college students experiences in predominantly white institutions. They found that black student organisations can either be positive or negative to their academic achievement and persistence. They further claim that their findings can provide suggestions on how to 'prepare' black students and support them. Another example is Museus (2008). The focus of his study was to examine the role of ethnic student organisations in fostering African American and Asian American students' cultural adjustment. Museus (2008) argued that student's ability to find membership in the cultures and/or subcultures in their campuses helps to account for their academic performance.

Despite a somewhat its simplistic and superficial approach to dealing with a fundamental question of institutional culture and the history of exclusion and segregation, the study of Girffrida and Douthit (2010) does highlight some interesting points. First, that there is an experiential difference between students of different races in predominantly white institutions. Further, and of interest to this study, that student organisations play a significant role in the experiences of students. The study of Musues (2008) on the other hand addresses an important subject; the role of cultural integration in student performance. Despite that not being a topic for discussion in the current study, it should be noted that the current study also

demonstrates the potential role that student organisations can have in institutions of higher learning.

However, there is little work that has been done to investigate student organisations from a psychological perspective. Nevertheless, Guido-DiBrito and Bachelor (1988) did take a psychological viewpoint in their investigation and found that student organisations play a critical role in identity development in students. They found that student organisations play a central role in shaping the identities of the student members. Another case is the study of Dugan (2006). He studied involvement and leadership amongst college students. His study found that collegiate involvement contributes to the development of leadership skills amongst students. Students who were more involved in their years in higher education were more likely to show some leadership skills (Douglas, 2006). Given their functional nature, student organisations provide such platforms for student involvement.

There is still much to be understood about student organisations and their role in higher education. As such, more still needs to be done to understand the role of student organisation in university experiences of students, especially from a psychological perspective. Part of what this research sought was to do that. This was done by exploring student experiences of sense of community at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and the role of student organisations in this. The next section will then explore sense of community and the theoretical underpinning in relation to this research.

2.2 Sense of Community

Sense of community is defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986. p 09). This definition moves away from the popular and traditional understanding of community.

Community has traditionally had a geographic connotation and understanding (Mtshemla, 2002).

Gusfield (1975) developed an understanding of community that moved away from the traditional understanding of the concept. He argued for two types of community. These are the geographic and relational community. Gusfield (1975) believes that territorial elements relate to people's identification with their geographic location. That is, cities, towns, villages, townships and so forth. Heller (1989) believes that such communities are initially developed to take advantage or were set up as defensive enclaves. In the South African context those are not the only considerations to be made. One has to note the historical background and the political reality that informs the structure of geographic communities. In 1948 legislation under the apartheid regime was passed to classify South Africans into racial groups i.e. White, Coloured, Indian and Black (Little, 2007). With that law residential areas were also segregated according to ones' racial group. In that way people resided in their legally defined locality and that was determined by their race. In understanding the geographic community in South Africa, one has to understand that there is a history of racial divisions that compelled people of the same skin colour in specified communities and enjoyed privileges as according to their racial group. This is of importance since this is a study in a post apartheid South Africa. Depsite the country having dismantled the legalisation of racial discrimination, it may be the case that individuals still with their racial category as defined by the apartherid regime.

The relational understanding of community refers to the qualities of human interaction and people's social ties without reference to a specific place of residence. In this kind of society the focus is not the location but common interests that allow for social relationships to develop (Heller, 1989). This may be through informal and formal institutions and organisations.

Of course, these two forms of community are not mutually exclusive to each other (Gusfield, 1975). Individuals who are in a geographically defined community can have social ties and common interests. However, by definition, these two constructions of community highlight two different kinds of social engagement and human interaction.

Using the foundation laid by Gusfield (1975), McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed a useful conceptualisation of sense of community. The crucial elements of this construct are *membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs* and *shared emotional connectedness.* The following paraphrases a summary of McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9-14) on the arguments under each element.

- Membership

  This primarily reflects the feeling of being part of the collective. Membership has clear boundaries of who belongs and who does not. Furthermore, each group has norms and practices. Behaviour that conforms to expected behaviour is reinforced and that which is foreign is punished. Boundaries created by membership usually create intimacy within the community and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, members of a community that make a personal investment to the community are likely to value their membership in the collective. Lastly, communities usually have a common symbol system. This is the essence of identification and creates a level of distinctness of the group.

- Influence

  Influence relates to both the ability of a member to influence the group and the group's ability to influence a member to conform. This, to a large extent, impacts the bond a member has to the community. This not only impacts on the significance of

the individual member on the community but also yields results for collective action. In sum, members of the group feel more attracted to groups that they can influence. The pressure for conformity and uniformity comes from the needs of the individual and the broader community for consensual validation.

- Integration and fulfilment of needs

  This refers to the rewards that individuals perceive to come out of the group. For example, status derived from being part of a particular group might serve as reinforcement to some community members. The outcome of the individuals analysis on whether they feel integrated and have their needs fulfilled is essential in maintaining a positive sense of togetherness in the community and keeping the community member as part of the community. Fulfilment of needs is a subjective component and the needs of different individuals vary. An individual member would then personally evaluate whether the group fulfils their needs given the values and expectations they have.

- Shared Emotional Connectedness

  This is influenced by shared history. However, it is not necessary that group members participate in the common history to share it. Positive consistent contact is likely to create greater unity in the group. The kind of events shared is also important. If community members go through important events together they are likely to have a greater bond. However, if individuals go through humiliating events amongst the community, they are likely to lose interest in the community. Of equal importance is the extent to which individuals invest in the group. Individuals get more attached to communities they invest in.

Dunham (1986) criticises McMillan and Chavis' (1986) conceptualization of sense of community. Durham's (1986) main argument is that the understanding of sense of community within this conceptualisation is individualistic and has elements of reductionism. The conceptualisation fails to understand sense of community as a human system central to development and reduces it to a mere summation of scores for various elements that are perceived to be central to understanding the sense of community that exists (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995). This is argued to be an ecological fallacy. That is, in an ecological study, one cannot solely use the aggregate score on a response sheet to comprehend the existing human relationships. There is also an assumption that the way people relate to their communities and the significance of those communities will be consistent across various contexts. This may not be the case given the common knowledge that people value various relationships and communities differently.

Further, there is a warning against a glamorous and romantic outlook of the concept. Grace et al (1995) argue that sense of community is very exclusive in its nature. It unkindly casts out those that may not fit in to the group and those that fail to conform. The nature of the concept, because of the boundaries it creates and the way it deals with deviation from the norm, has negative implications for some individuals and this also needs to be considered and engaged with in the literature.

Despite the above criticisms the work by McMillan and Chavis (1986) has continued to guide research in this field. Although their conceptualisation is technical and fails to capture some of the more nuanced aspects of the human community, it is still useable in that it speaks to many variables that are central in our understanding of a community. The framework also represents a realistic view of how individuals engage with and relate to a community. In spite of it being problematic to some degree, this is one of the most well theorised frameworks around this topic (Mak, Chueng & Law, 2009). Yes indeed, readers must concede to the fact

that sense of community has its weaknesses and must not only be looked at in a positive light. However, my general analysis of the concept, as conceptualised by McMillan and Chavis (1986), is that it is useable, relevant and continues to guide our understanding in spite of its weaknesses. As such, this theory was used as a basis of understanding sense of community in this paper.

It is important to note that research that has been done with regards to this variable has been very limited in South Africa. Much of the research that has been done is European and North American. Furthermore, much of the research that exists still focuses on the geographic element of sense of community although the variable speaks to much more than that (Ferrari, Cowman, Milner, Gutierrez & Drake, 2009). Further, research on this field largely focuses on urbanisation. For example Chavis and Wandersman (1990) studied the role of sense of community as a catalyst for participation and development in the urban environment. Talen (1999) on the other hand used sense of community and neighbourhood form to assess the social doctrine of urbanism. Toenley, Kloos, Green and Franco (2011) studied the negative effects of sense of community as they looked at its effects on human diversity and cultural relativity. They argue that despite the fact that sound investigations have shown sense of community has positive effects there are some negative implications that are not usually investigated. As such, the effects of sense of community still need further investigation. In higher or further education, there is some literature about sense of community which focus on various samples (Cicognani, Pirini, Keyes, Joshanloo, Rostami & Nosratabadi, 2007). For example, Ferrari et al (2009) focus on administrative staff and academic staff while Rovai (2002) focused on students in distance learning. Still these are not South African studies. In contrast, the current paper studied students from a residential learning university in South Africa.

Existing research informs us that sense of community has been associated with a greater sense of wellbeing (Rovai, 2002). This has been studied across various contexts. In general, persons with a high sense of community report a sense of empowerment and perceived control over their lives (Ferrari & Chapman, 1999). In the workplace it has been found that a lack of sense of community is associated with job dissatisfaction and an increased level of grievances (Cotano, 1993). Lack of sense of community has also been associated with physical ailments and greater problems with health care (Alern, 1996). Parallel to that, Fisher and Sonn (2007) found that greater levels of sense of community are associated with more supportive environments and outcomes. In the context of education it has been found that an increased level of sense of community increases the levels of satisfaction of students (Rovai, 2002). This has positive implications for students pursuing their studies.

What is observed in research in this field is that sense of community is associated with social support (Mak et al, 2009). This and possibly other elements related to this concept contribute to making the environment for human development and performance conducive. In unpleasant circumstances, an individual who has a sense of social support may arguably be in a better position to deal with the challenges faced. This possibly accounts for the relationship that may exist between wellbeing and sense of community. Sonn et al (1993) argue that the integration of social networks contributes positively to feelings of togetherness and meaningfulness in spite of stressors. This network, logically, contributes positively in coping with the pressure from stressors. Further, having high levels of sense of community encourages individuals to get more involved in communities (Chavis, 1983). This may, perhaps, also have positive gains for community development. But of interest to this study, this provides a possible support mechanism to mediate stress whenever it may be necessary (Chavis, 1983).

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, student life can be stressful. The role of sense of community in relation to this has just been described. This review now turns to more in depth discussions of stress and wellbeing.

2.3 Stressors, Strain and Well-being

To begin, it is important to note that already in 1970 McGrath was commenting on the fact that literature on stress had been growing rapidly throughout many years. This growth has shown us various conceptualisations of stress. Through these developments we have seen the emergence of the transactional model of stress. This approach considers both the individual and environmental factors that contribute to stress (Lehman, 1972). Further, it also considers the interaction between the two in the surfacing of stress. Stress according to this model is defined as "a misfit between a person's skills and abilities and demands of the job, and a misfit in terms of a person's needs supplied by the environment" French, Rogers and Cobb (1974 cited in Schuler, 1982, p. 6). Potent in the definition is a clear articulation that it is the interaction of situational and individual characteristics that are most predictive of stress (Lehman, 1972). Further, the definition makes it clear that stress is dependent on many variables that may vary across individuals at any given time and circumstance.

The fundamental idea in the transactional model is the idea that one cannot draw linear relationships when dealing with the variables influencing stress (Lehman, 1972). There tend to be many varying factors to consider. The individual's perception of the environment and the personal set of unique skills that an individual possesses play a central role in predicting whether or not the individual will experience strain. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that strain emerges in many instances when the individual does not have enough cognitive resources to deal with the demands of the environment (Walker & Walker, 1987). Stress is thus understood to be a consequence of person's appraisal of whether their personal resources are sufficient to meet the demands of the environment (Michie, 2002). In this way stress or

psychological distress and experiences of strain are understood as a subjective response to the demands of the environment (i.e. stressors). A stressor in this context is defined as "perceived or objective external force, such as a demand, pressure, constraint or deprivation that brings about such strains as dissatisfaction, performance decrements and somatic symptoms" (Sutton & Rafaeli, 1987, p. 261).

Strain refers to the feeling that psychologically, physiologically or otherwise, one feels that their body or resources are stretched beyond limits and cannot cope (Michie, 2002)

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) when confronted with stressors, an individual engages in two kinds of appraisals (Lazarus, 1976). First, primary appraisal is the cognitive process of evaluating events, forces or experiences in terms of the severity of the demands. The individual evaluates the nature of the stressor and the demands it brings forth (Michie, 2002). This analysis is subjective and contingent in that an individual may perceive the same stressor in a different way under different conditions (Michie, 2002). The second appraisal is named cognitive appraisal. This is a process of evaluating the coping resources and options that are available to deal with the potentially stressful situations (Michie, 2002). In this case, the individual will then engage in a process of cognitive evaluation of his or her personal and environment resources to deal with the stressful event (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). The model further proposes that individuals will use their cognitive and behavioural strategies of adaptation to deal with the given stressful event (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). This further strengthens the subjective nature of stress. Cognisant of these appraisals, one then understands that what is important is not the objective environment but rather the individual's observation of environmental challenges and appraisals of his or her ability to cope with these challenges (Fox, Spector & Rodopman, 2004).

From this it is clear that negative outcomes of stress would occur at an individual level. Using this model, it becomes evident that individuals do not perceive stress in a uniform manner.

What may cause strain to one individual may not do so to another. It is important, however, to note that strain (as a result of the heightened demands in a stressful situation) may have both a psychological and physical impact on an individual (Goldstein, Atkins, Landau, Brown & Leigh, 2006). Epel, Blackburn, Lin, Dhabhar, Adler, Morrow & Cawthon (2004, p. 1) state that "people who are stressed over long periods tend to look haggard". Regardless, of the relative clumsiness of this statement, it leads us to an understanding of the relationship that exists between stress and individual well-being. Epel et al (2004) found that psychological stress could affect aging in various ways. More threatening though, Hadanym, Beker, Eshel and Feldman (2006) assert that stress-related diseases are a central cause for deaths for many humans. As such, stress is then noted to be a significant contributor to the level of ill-health and in practice it can be authentically used as a significant measure of the level well-being amongst individuals.

In line with what has been established about the effects of stress, it is worth noting that amongst students, stress has been shown to detract from academic performance (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003). Several studies have clearly shown that stress contributes to poor academic performance (Clark & Rieker, 1986; Struthers, Perry & Menec, 2000). In many cases, academic work acts as a stressor which then, depending on the presence of other stressors and their effect, the coping mechanisms and the resources of an individual, may cause strain (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003). Other related stressors include but are not limited to time pressure, tests, essays, projects and exams.

It is also worth noting that some stressors are not academic in nature but do have an impact on the student and the student's academic work. Chief amongst many is financial difficulties. Of the students many students that were facing academic exclusions (in that they did not meet

the minimum academic performance requirements) that approached Student Representative Council of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg seeking assistance as a result of their performance in the academic year 2009, more than two thirds of them cited financial reasons as the chief or sub reason to account for why they failed (Nhlapo, 2010).

South Africa has the distinction of becoming the most unequal society in the world (Bhorat & Westhuizen, 2009). In this inequality, higher education remains the one of the most difficult necessities to afford (Balintuli, 2010). Amongst those that do access higher education, financial difficulties continue to be a significant source of threat to the academic life of students. As a result, a large proportion of students drop out of university due to financial difficulties and it contributed greatly to their lack of performance (SASCO, 2009). Furthermore, having limited financial resources does have direct links and negatively affects students in accessing necessities, like extra tutors, laptops and text books, to succeed in university (SASCO, 2009). In that way, financial difficulties act as stressors and may have an impact on the success of students.

Essentially, it is worth noting that stress may be induced by a variety of stressors. These may be related directly or indirectly to the academic work of students. These stressors may affect the functional capacity of the student. As a result, students may not be able to perform their academic duties or any other responsibilities they have. Furthermore, stress adversely impacts the health of students and in that way negatively affects their ability to excel in their academic work (Clark & Rieker, 1986; Felsten & Wilcox, 1992). In some situations stress has also been found to be related to anxiety and depression amongst college students (Aldwin & Greenberger, 1987). This shows that stress may have physical consequences as a signal of

strain. This may be useful in understanding the strain experienced by participants in the current study.

Using the transactional model of stress as a broad theoretical framework, this study:

1. Explored the demands, i.e. stressors, faced by students at this university
2. Identified whether these students experience strain and what kinds of strain they may experience
3. Attempted to understand their sense of community as a subjective factor that may influence their appraisal and hence their levels of wellbeing.

This was done specifically in relation to members of student organisations since very little research exists in this area in South Africa. The research is still at an exploratory stage. As such, this paper made a qualitative assessment using interviews to achieve its aims.

2.3.1 Research questions

The research questions asked by this research report were as follows:

1. What are the main stressors (or demands) faced by students in student organisations in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg?
2. What are the experiences of strain by students in student organisations?
3. What is impact of sense of community on student's coping ability in stressful circumstances?
4. What are the experiences of sense of community by students in student organisations feel towards the university?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study took a qualitative approach to the research. The objective of qualitative research is to determine patterns that emerge after close observation, careful documentation and thoughtful analysis of the research topic (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Further, qualitative research elicits contextual findings in contrast to sweeping generalisations (Riordan, 2001). Quantitative research, on the other hand, is seen by some researchers as merely looking at the frequency of occurrences as compared to the qualitative approach which seeks to abstract meaning and understanding (Newman & Benz, 1998). The qualitative approach to this study is more suitable since this is an exploratory study which seeks to understand various concepts in relation to the study group chosen for this study. The study has no intention of evaluating the patterns of occurrence of various phenomena. The study also has no intention of evaluating trends in a given population. The study seeks to understand, unpack and explore the experiences of students in student organisations. Given that, the qualitative approach to research is a preferable method of research. To follow are the participants, procedure and analysis that informed this research.

3.1 Participants and Sampling

This study sought to understand the role of student organisation in the university experiences of students studying in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As such, the participants of this study had to be individuals that are members of student organisations and have actively participated in the activities of the organisation of the during the academic year 2010. Participants were also drawn from dissimilar student organisations to investigate the varying experiences for the different organisations. This research then obtained nine (9) participants from the seven (7) student organisation clusters that exist. The clusters are; Political, Religious, Cultural, Social, Social Development, Academic and Business.

A snowball sampling approach was used. This is a non-probability sampling approach which uses participants of the study to build up the sample (Heckathorn, 2002). In this study, participants to the study were able to recommend volunteers who fit the research profile. The research profile was that participants must have participated strongly in the activities of their student organisation i.e. attended meeting and events. Further, participants should have been in the sub-committee or executive committee of the student organisation. Through referrals, participants to the study helped get more participants through referring us to more individuals.

All the participants were elected to be in the executive committee of their respective organisations for the academic year 2011 and were immensely involved in the work of the organisation in the academic year 2010. Participants were from different faculties and races. Further they were also from different levels of study. The academic profile of the participants is as follows:

1. Bachelor of Arts, 3rd year
2. Bachelor of Commerce, 3rd year
3. LLB, 2nd year
4. Bachelor of Education, 5th year
5. Bachelor of Science, 3rd year
6. Bachelor of Engineering, 3rd year
7. Bachelor of Arts, 2nd year
8. Bachelor of Science 3rd year
9. Bachelor of Engineering, 3rd year

3.2 Procedure

The Student Representative Council (SRC) of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg was made aware of my intentions to do the study. Student organisations directly fall under the jurisdiction of the SRC. One does not have to seek permission from the SRC for this kind of a study but to ensure good faith and respect for the SRC, it was communicated to them.

Using no particular method, communication was made with the relevant students and I arranged meetings with each of them where the interview took place. The participants were asked to refer me to other colleagues of theirs who meet the criteria.

After the collection of data and the analysis, results were communicated to the SRC and the students who participated in the study. This was done through an executive summary that will was emailed to the participants and the Clubs, Societies and Organisations officer in the SRC.

3.3 Data Analysis

To analyse means to separate something into part or elements (Kvale, 1996). The data was analysed after the raw data was collected during the research interviews. For accuracy, notes were taken during the interviews and the interviews were recorded.

The analysis of data involved the examining of people's words and statements in the context of the constructs in question.

This study used the individual as the unit of analysis. In that way, individuals were assessed according to their own experiences. The study used the responses drawn from interviews to answer the research questions. Responses were analysed using thematic content analysis. This is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data (Anderson, 2007). Qualitative data may take the form of interview transcripts, video recordings, images, sound recordings and other

texts (Anderson, 2007). The current research used interview transcripts and sound recordings.

4. Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this study were voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, anonymity and feedback.

- Voluntary participation

Participants were informed that participation is voluntary and that there is no benefit associated with participating in this study.

- Informed consent

The participation information sheet informed the participant what the study entailed and any questions that the participants had were answered by me. Participants were also asked to sign a qualitative research consent form. In signing the form, participants acknowledged that their participation is voluntary and that they understood what the study is about. Participants were required to sign a consent form to allow for the interview to be recorded.

- Confidentiality

All information that is scribed and recorded has been, and will continue to be kept between the participant, the researcher and the supervisor unless ordered by the Justice system or the Health Professional Council of South Africa. The supervisor will keep the information for record keeping. However, as per the ethical standards expected of researchers, no information shared by the participants will be shared with any other individual.

- Privacy

The interview questions were drafted not be intrusive. However, the participants reserved the right to keep any matter that was discussed during the interviews private. As such, they were not be compelled to respond to any question.

- Anonymity

Since this is a qualitative study that involves interview questions, it is not possible that the participants be anonymous to the researcher. However, the researcher will protect the anonymity of the participants. As such, no names, surnames, identity number or student number will be reported.

- Feedback

Feedback will be given to the Student Representative Council (SRC) and the students that participated in the research in a form of an executive summary of the study. This will be done immediately after the research report is submitted.

Besides the points above, the researcher was also cognisant of structures of the university such as the Careers, Counselling and Development Unit (CCDU) and the Emthonjeni Centre that may have been relevant if any stressful and/or emotional issue that needed professional intervention had arisen.

5. Results

For this section, it is important to observe the table on Appendix A.

In designing this study, the following were noted in relation to the contextual/background variables:

a) That literature on student organisation is very limited, largely sociological and focuses largely on European and American countries.

b) That literature on stress is also largely European and American.
c) That there has not been much literature on sense of community that focuses on the type of community this study has chosen (i.e. student organisations) and that available literature on sense of community focuses mostly on urbanism and urbanisation.

Having noted the above this exploratory study:

1. Explored the demands, i.e. stressors, faced by students at this university
2. Identified whether these students experience strain and what kinds of strain they may experience
3. Attempted to understand their sense of community as a subjective factor that may influence their appraisal and hence their levels of wellbeing.

This research tried to respond to the points above. In the following sections I unpack these research questions in relation to the data collected. However, it is very important to understand the rationale behind individuals joining student organisations. As I attempt to understand and unpack the points stated above the reader should also first consider that particular point.

5.1 Motivation to join and Benefits of (active) membership

First it must be mentioned that there is no intention to make these themes a central part of this study. These, however, were not explored in the same manner as the others that are central to this study. However, the results show some points around why people join student organisation received much attention and cannot be ignored.

It is evident from the results that individuals join student organisations for various reasons. From the responses given, it came out that some people joined the organisation for personal

reasons and personal convictions. This is to say that they have a personal attachment with a particular organisation's character, ideology, or objective. At the same time, there are other students that join student organisations because there are certain skills that membership to these organisations offers that they believe will be needed later in their lives, particularly in the work place. These students expressed that they need to gain some skills which will put them at an advantage once they start working.

In general, the understanding collected, gained from this data is that students have clear reasons why they join student organisations. The benefits that membership to these organisations has contribute to the decision of students joining. From what students have reported, it is clear that the decision to join a student organisation usually has a particular objective. Seemingly, the decision to join a student organisation is not an impulsive one. It follows a particular line of thinking, motivation and understanding. What is also noticeable from these results is that student organisations allow members to explore many facets of life and are a great avenue for growth.

Q1: *What are the main stressors (or demands) faced by students in student organisations in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg?*

All participants to this study indicated that they have been stressed at some point in their academic life. This is parallel with what many researchers have highlighted, the fact that students experience stress due to a variety of reasons. In this case, students in student organisations pointed out that pressure from academic work usually leads to them getting stressed. The sense of getting overloaded and having pressure due to being with one's academic work was cited as a contributing factor to students experiencing stress.

However, of interest to this study is beyond what previous researchers have found with regards to this subject. Amongst these students there is a peculiar feature that is coded as

‘Academic work versus student organisation’ on the table. This refers to the conflict between academic work and student organisation activities. In common language, I choose to refer to this as love-hate relationship active members of student organisations have for the student organisations. What came out strongly from the participants was that there is not enough time to deal with both their academic responsibilities and their organisational work. Time that would ideally be dedicated for academic work, from an academic point of view, was, in many cases contested by pressures from organisational work. This goes further than the time each individual dedicates to for their personal study. The contestation is such that lectures and tutorials are missed in order to perform, adequately, the responsibilities of the organisation.

This kind of situation then calls for members of student organisations to exercise caution and be able to balance their organisational work with their academic work, they said. This is very important to them since failure to perform in both has its repercussions. However, it came out that balancing the two is not an easy exercise. They found this to be a strenuous and dubious activity. One of the factors that seemingly contributed to this is their apparent indecisiveness to prioritise one over the other. In as much anyone may advice that these students prioritiese their academic work, the reality is that these students feel a sense of duty towards these organisations and cannot neglect them despite the conflict they cause with their academic work. “How do you prioritise? Which one do you put first?” said one student who was expressing the frustrations and difficulties that come with this commitment. Worryingly, it also came out that in many cases, even when there are academic deadlines like test, essays and exams, they continued to deal with student organisation matters that also needed their attention. However, what is even more concerning is that these students did not show any certainty or confidence in having systems in place to deal with the challenge of balancing the two. In other words, there seemed not to be any calculated mechanism or philosophy that is

used to ensure that they are able to deal with their student organisation work without letting their academic work suffer.

Q2: What are the experiences of strain by students in student organisations?

It was highlighted in *Q1* that students in student organisations admitted to being stressed at some given point in their student lives. From the table one can observe a few things that I ought to discuss later. I note, for example, that students experience strain in a variety of ways. It was also apparent that stressful situations can result in frustration and depression as some researchers have argued before. Further, through the participants, I note that stressful situations also convey themselves behaviourally. In some cases participants reported having a laissez-faire approach and distancing approach to their academic work as a result of stress. In other cases, participants indicated that they chose to lock themselves in their own spaces when they were stressed. These will be discussed in the discussion section.

Q3: What is impact of sense of community on student's coping ability in stressful circumstances?

In order to understand if and how sense of community influences student's coping ability in stressful situations I explored the student's sense of community towards the university (next research question) and the resources participants feel were useful in dealing with stressful times and stressful situations. Overtly, the results for the latter show that, like experiences of stress, there are various ways that people deal with stressful situations. It came out from the results that participants felt that talking to their friends had a positive impact in dealing with stressful situations. It was apparent that "chilling out with friends" and "sharing ideas" helps them relax before they can go back to their studies. Equally, some participants felt that talking to family members or going home played a critical role in reducing their stress.

Q4: What are the experiences of sense of community by students in student organisations feel towards the university?

The current research attempted to understand the participant's sense of community towards the university and how strong it is. Results gave some indication of the strength of sense of community students felt. There was some indication that students felt some attachment to (or maybe through) their university residence. It was said that residences gave a feeling of family-hood amongst the students and a great level of attachment. It also came out that student organisations have an impact in the sense of community students feel. It was apparent though, that some students are attached, largely, to their fellow students and friends rather more than any other sector. Over and above this, students showed a level of attachment for the organisations they were involved in, the university as a whole or the student population. It should also be noted that participants in this study highlighted that they are either not engaged with the university community or they are not engaged to the extent that they would like to be. Participants indicated that they shared a sense of community with some sectors of the university than the university community in general. For example many students suggested that they have a sense of community towards the student populace but not management.

6. Discussion

6.1 Student stressors and experiences of strain

Earlier I highlighted that according to Sutton and Rafaeli (1987) a stressor is a perceived or objective external force such as a demand, pressure, constrain or deprivation. This force may bring about dissatisfaction, performance decrements and somatic symptoms. A misfit between a person's skills and abilities and demands of the environment results in strain (French et al, 1974). Strain refers to the feeling that psychologically, physiologically or

otherwise, one feels that their body or resources are stretched beyond limits and cannot cope (Michie, 2002). I also noted that academic work, in many cases, does act as a stressor and may produce strain (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003). The data collected in this study confirms that assertion. Participants to this study alluded that the times where they experienced most strain was during exams time and when they had deadlines. They indicated that this was because of the demands that academic work and deadlines imposed on them, they felt strained and overloaded. As such, I note through theory and the results collected that academic work acts a stressor amongst students in student organisations. Academic work is also noted to have a greater impact if is it able to produce pressure. This is the case during exams and when students have deadlines.

What is also worth discussing is that work from one's student organisation also produces its own stressors. Like in academic work, participants indicated that they sometimes had deadlines to meet, meetings to attend and events to plan. As a result, they had to respond to the demands of the environment. Failure to manage these kinds of stressors resulted in them experiencing strain. Participants further highlighted that they find balancing academic work and student organisation work is to be very difficult. Theoretically, I noted that the transactional model argues that the interaction of situational and individual characteristics that are most predictive of stress (Lehman, 1972). Further, theory informs us that strain emerges in many instances when the individual does not have enough cognitive resources to deal with the demands of the environment (Lehman, 1972). From the content drawn from the participants one understands that at different times, participants used various resources to deal with the stressors at hand. The stressors were understood not to be uniform and not experienced in a uniform nature. Some participants felt that there was a good 'work and play' balance at this university and cited they hardly experienced strain. However, some experienced strain more often. This parallels what theory around the subject asserts. It

conveys individuals have varying cognitive resources and coping mechanisms. As such they will not experience stressors in a uniform manner. This then re-affirms the need to consider the situational and individual factors when dealing with the subject of stress.

Through this research it was also confirmed that strain can convey itself mentally and physiologically as Epel et al (2004) and Goldstein et al (2006) argued. Some participants indicated that when experiencing strain, they experienced frustration and depression. As a result of strain, one also observed that individuals use various coping mechanisms to deal with the demands of the environment. This included temporary withdrawal, consultation with relevant people, spending time with friends, going to church, taking a walk, etc. Using those mechanisms, participants coped better with the demands of the environment.

What is peculiar about this research is that it highlights the fact that active members of student organisations face a distinct challenge of dealing with the demands that come from their commitment to their student organisation and the demands of academic work. As such, these students have, at the very least, dual responsibilities. That is, they have a responsibility to perform academically and at the same time they have to perform in their student organisation. From their responses it is clear that there is no mechanism put in place to ensure that they are able to deal with such conflict. It should be noted, however, that student organisations vary in their level of activity and that the extent of activeness in the organisation also varies. Individuals who are in leadership positions are likelier to be highly active than ordinary members. Student participants made it clear that they experienced heightened responsibilities as a result of their responsibilities because they were all in leadership positions in their organisations.

With students active in student organisation, what becomes evident is that time is a limited resource. These students are bombarded with responsibilities but they have little time. This

makes it difficult to manage. As such, prospects of success in both academic work and student organisations are left to chance. Students may be forced to neglect part of their responsibilities in order to compensate for other responsibilities. As such, they neglect their student organisation work to focus on their academic work or vice versa. Following theory, one would then conclude that students who have greater resources cognitively and otherwise will then stand a better chance of success. The primary challenge, therefore, may be that not all students involved may have the necessary resources to be able to deal with these demands. However, it is arguable that students exposed to extra faculty tutors, study groups, friends to assist with taking noted, notes available on the internet and relevant study books may have more resources may have better chance to perform better.

One should understand that student organisations should not, in any way, be positioned to reduce chances of student success or distract students from their academic responsibilities. Ideally, they should be complementary to the functioning and the workings of the university and help develop students without compromising their academic work. Indeed, students are being developed and enjoying the benefits of their membership but this seemingly happens at the risk of compromising academic work. This is a risk that many students may wish to avoid. This, I am sure, was not the vision the university had in allowing for student organisations. However, if mechanisms are not put in place to assist in making sure that they do not face such risks, the challenge is not likely to go away. In detail, one may suggest that special attention must be paid to the functioning of student organisations in order to attempt reduce further, any unnecessary administrative work from students to allow them greater opportunities to deal with this peculiar challenge. One must note that the university has, in some ways, attempted to deal with that. This has been seen through instituting a division by the name of the Student Development and Leadership Unit (SDLU). This structure has a responsibility to give administrative support to the Student Representative Council and

student organisations that are registered with the university. It also has the responsibility to provide leadership support and training to student structures. This research is not in a position to assess the successes and failures of this structure. However, the data collected suggests that active students in these organisations need more support. Students must be given enough assistance and training on how to deal with the dual demands that they are committed to and how to make sure that they do succeed in both entities of their student lives.

6.2 Sense of community

Using literature, let us attempt to make sense of findings on this subject.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) divided sense of community into four elements that, they argued, are central when observing sense of community. These are Membership, Influence, Integration and fulfilment of needs and Emotional connectedness

- Membership

McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that membership reflects the feeling of being part of a collective. There are clear boundaries of who belongs and who does not and that there are expected behavioural patterns within each community. Members invest to ensure that they are part of the collective community and importantly, there have one common symbol system. Such usually speaks to the culture of a given community.

When they were asked what they feel makes the Wits community distinct from any other community, participants gave varying views. Most potent of all of them is the fact that the Wits community is a diverse community. It was highlighted that this community consists of individuals with different styles, backgrounds, religions, culture, inter alia. There are many ways that this can be read. An optimist would probably conclude that these participants were celebrative of diversity and difference. As they alluded, this gives them an opportunity to be

open-minded and liberal. It gives them a chance to learn about other cultures, lifestyles and other ways of thinking. Further, it gives them a chance to have friends beyond ethnic, religious, class and racial lines "without getting discriminated against" as one student expressed. On the contrary, a pessimist would probably argue that there is high a sense of otherness amongst the members of this community in that participants saw their differences more than their similarities. For example, none of the participants made reference to the shared intellectual space that exists at the community and how, at least amongst the student, the university tries to select the best. Evidence of disintegration was also noted. Some students highlighted that there seems not to be any integration between races. "Everyone sticks to themselves". There was also an indication that there is no inter religious contact and that stereotypes on ethnicity are well and strong. What does this mean?

The data collected seems to indicate that members of this community are appreciative of this diversity but it is not reaching its full potential. One must remember that members of this community are also members of the communities they come from and were potentially socialised. The Wits community gives them an opportunity to go beyond their socialised norms and expectation. Individuals from different cultures are expected to experiences the world or aspects of the world in different ways (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003). Their upbringing and how society has been defined to them may differ. From what the data collected it is understood that, university in general and student organisations in particular offer individuals from various dissimilar cultures an opportunity to experience each other's cultures. From that experience, participants indicated that they were better positioned to understand and accept those cultures in the broader society. In this way it changes and/or broadens their views of the world and other cultures.

However, such positive sentiments were not shared by all participants to the study. Some participant highlighted that because of the dissimilarity of cultures, they are stereotyped and

prejudiced against. Other participants also highlighted that the sense that they got from the university is that there is a high level of disintegration and isolation defined across racial, class, religious and tribal lines.

Membership to this community is then characterised by many factors. However, what came out strong was that besides diversity, these participants expressed no distinct feature that distinguishes their membership to the university. A particular institutional culture would be expected to further the sense of belonging of the participants given the integration element in the theoretical elements of sense of community. However, in their experience, there is not Wits culture. This may leave some to fall back on their pre-established cultures and beliefs.

- Influence

Using McMillan and Chavis (1986) one would note that the ability to influence a community and the community's ability to influence an individual plays a role in influencing their sense of community. Such gives consensual validation and increases an individual attraction to a group. Further, it improves the connection an individual has towards their group.

From the data collected it was clear that the community at Wits influences the participants of this study. Participants report positive aspects of this influence such as personal growth, being open-minded and being more social. There is a general agreement on this influence. Some participants though, felt that this community does not influence them much. One felt that she has greater influence from home but does, obviously, learn from this community. However, the general understanding gained was that the community at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, does have an influence on the participants. One participant who felt he was not influenced much by this community highlighted that he refuses to compromise some of his principles as a form of his identity but conceded to the fact that the community has a distinct influence on him. His comment marks something important noted

as a criticism to sense of community earlier. Grace et al (1995) argue that sense of community is exclusive in its nature. They further argued that it casts out those that may not fit in to the group and those that fail to conform. In that way, since it is governed by some culture, it creates boundaries and norms for its members. The results indicate that, as a community, the Wits University imposes some influence. This may be strong or weak. Individuals deal directly with that influence and respond with conformity or deviation. It is difficult for this study to evaluate how the community at Wits responds to deviation from the norms and expectation because, according to the participants, it does not have too strong a culture.

With regards to how participants influence the Wits community, what must be noted is that students faced a great difficulty in deciding whether and how they influence this community. In general, students indicated that they do influence this community but highlighted that it was a big community, therefore, not easy to influence. There was also a disparity in the language use between the responses they gave for influencing the community ('try to', 'I think through trying', 'I want to') as opposed to the community influencing them ('it has influenced me', 'it has made me' 'I've become'). It was apparent that participants used more resolute phrases when speaking about how they were influenced by the community but were more tentative when speaking about how they influence the community. Nevertheless, it was clear that some students felt that they influenced this community through their student organisations. This follows the logic that the Wits community is a big community and through collective action and campaigns, individuals can influence it. Nevertheless, there were other indicated that by being themselves and adding their worth in the university, they felt they are influencing it in some way.

From the data, it is clear that the university community has greater influence on the participants than they have on the community. This is expected given the size of the

community. Over and above, in communities with a strong sense of community, members must be able to influence the community and the community must influence them. I can say, with a few reservations, that this is the case for the participants to this study.

- Integration and fulfilment of needs

This refers to the rewards that individuals perceive to come out of the group and the extent to which they feel that they are part of the community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). This is subjective in that people have varying experiences of it.

When it comes to the fulfilment of needs, students felt that this community fulfils their needs. These needs include social, academic, sports and spiritual needs. Students made reference to the social clubs, sports clubs and other related clubs and structures to address their needs. In general, participants felt that this community is able to cater for their needs and they are content. However, there were some concerns about the university's ability to respond to needs of students who find themselves in desperate situations. There were also assertions that due to the university's lack of culture some needs of students are not fulfilled. Culture, by its nature provides a sense of meaning, a sense of belonging and a level of direction. A seemingly culturally disintegrated community may fail to fulfil the needs of its members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Participants felt that they are not 'satisfyingly' engaged with the university community. Participants either stated that they were not as engaged as they would like to be or that they were not engaged at all. However, there was one participant who felt that he was engaged and that this engagement was achieved through his student organisation. For the others who felt that they were not engaged the reasons attributed to this to the size of the community and they generally struggled to the possibilities of them influencing this community. It also came

out that ‘lack of culture’ in the university community contributes to this lack of engagement. Let us explore this.

The Wits community lacks shared symbols, language and passion, traditions (besides the exit tradition of graduation) and customs. These are central to culture. This community, on paper, has clear articulations on what distinguishes it and passions the university stands for. In practice, students do not show any association and attachment to such. I concede, some of the attributes in culture are latent and covert, likely to be better experienced than reported. This includes the living diversity of views, traditions, cultures, religions and races that are taken for granted by members of this community but make up what this community is known to be. However, as noted before, the distinguishing feature about this community is that aspect and through the participants I could identify no other. Perhaps, this overarching culture of diversity is the primary culture that influences many aspects of this community. It may influence the acceptance of difference. This may be in opinions, beliefs, interests and priorities, amongst other things.

Culture cannot touch, see or smell culture. It is just there. One lives it. Unfortunately, this is not a study of culture and one cannot reach certain ends through this research given its incapacity to deal with certain topics. However, from the observations of this research and the understanding of the university structure, it should be reported that there are various sub-cultures in the university as a result of residences, student organisations, sports clubs, schools and faculties. The most consistent theme that may be descriptive of the Wits culture is diversity. However, it must be mentioned that what brings the Wits community together, if anything, besides diversity, geography and shared space or proximity, is yet to be discovered. In the words of a slogan of one of the residences at Wits “I’d rather be a Knockandian than a Witsie”. Participants in this study highlighted that they are attached to their residences, friends and the student organisations. I am sure that is natural. However, there was no sense

of any further attachment to the broader university community. Parallel to that, they felt that they were not really engaged with the university community. As such, one cannot speak boldly about integration into the Wits community culture as a whole. There are invisible walls segregating students, as participants have argued. Further, there are also walls dividing students, staff and management. Maybe these walls are not so invisible when it comes to students, staff and management. However, failure to integrate into university culture has been shown to have a link with poor academic performance (Museus, 2008).

- Shared Emotional Connectedness

McMillan and Chavis (1986) provide that this is influenced by shared history. However, it is not necessary that group members participate in the common history to share it. Further, positive consistent contact is likely to create greater unity in the group.

In addressing the issue of culture, the central issues in shared emotional connectedness have been addressed. As indicated before, students generally feel attached to sub sects of the university if not their friends. The Wits community is an "apathetic community". Apathetic to issues or activities that are not centrally related to their degrees and work for that are not students. Due to the apathy amongst the Wits community, it comes as no surprise that there is no indication that there is any shared emotional connectedness by the participants towards the university community. However, the levels of apathy may be rock bottom on issues and activities hosted by student residences, student organisations and sports organisations solely for their constituency. The level of emotional connectedness, given contact and participation will then be expected to be higher for those sub sects of the university community.

In dealing with *Q4: How strong a sense of community do students in student organisations feel towards the university?*

In responding to this question, the reader ought to take note of the theoretical aspects of sense of community. These were discussed in the literature review and the discussion chapter. It is then important to understand the data collected from the participants against these theoretical components.

With regards to membership, the participants highlighted that there was a distinction between the Wits community they are part of and other communities. As such, they understood diversity to be the most distinguishing factor that marks the Wits community. Besides diversity, I also noted that access to this community is not easily attained. It required academic merit and financial capabilities (or assistance). Therefore there are clear boundaries that set apart this community from any other community.

With regards to influence, one needs to understand that, theoretically, communities that have a high sense of community are those that are able to influence members of the community and have members being able to influence the community. This research noted that the participants highlighted that they are influenced by the Wits community and to some extent they were able to influence this community.

With regards to integration and the fulfilment of needs, the participants indicated that their needs were considerably fulfilled by this community. There were, however, some concerns with regards to the culture of the university and the extent to which there is integration.

With regards to shared emotional connectedness, it is noted that participants highlighted that they largely shared some emotional connectedness to their student organisations and some their residences. As such, it is observed that participants felt some connectedness to the university community in general. In some cases this was as a result of their student organisations, residence or sport. However, what was of is also highlighting is that participants felt some emotional connectedness with the student community and not the

university community. The distinction is that participants do not necessarily feel connected to the broader community but only with their fellow students.

In sum, it is fair to say that participants generally feel some sense of community towards the university. During the time of this study, the university community was able to possess all the components that allow for a sense of community.

Implications for:

Q3: How does a sense of community influence student's coping ability in stressful circumstances?

The sense of community is influenced by the sub-categories provided by McMillan and Chavis (1986). From the responses given by the participants it is noted that in stressful situations spoke to their friends, parents and consultants when they were in stressful situations. Some of these were in the university while some others were not. What is evident from the data is that there is participants seem to have a sense that they have some outlets of assistance when they are in stressful situations. These are influenced by their distinction of their membership of this particular community and how the university community is able fulfil their needs. In sum, what was observed is that within the university community there are, to some extent, platforms that could be used to deal with stress and were put to use by the participants. The question of whether or not the platforms parallel match the needs of students is another one. From the responses of the participants it is evident that the platforms are not enough.

What must also be noted from data is the use of talking as a way to deal with excessive stressors. This confirms existing literature that asserts that talking helps in dealing with stress.

It is seemingly the case that due to the community participants find themselves in, they were able to use the option to talk to someone and help rid the stress.

What must be observed is that because of the environment fulfilling the needs of the participants, the extent to which they experience stressors is reduced. Failure to attain some of their needs would be expected to result in greater frustration. In that case, the ability of the university community to provide for some of the needs of its community members contributes to its members avoiding strain.

7. Limitations and Weaknesses

These are the limitations that this study had:

1. Researcher's involvement

It must be noted that the researcher, I, Bafana Lesley Nhlapo, am the former President of the Student Representative Council at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The term of office was 2010. Almost all the participants that were involved in the study knew about this and this might have indirectly impacted on the responses they gave depending on their perceptions. One cannot quantify the extent that this influenced participants, if any. However, it is important that I make mention of that fact. To deal with this, however, I attempted to clarify that this research had nothing to do with my views or beliefs but the participant's experiences

2. Proximity of events and reports

This research was primarily based on the experiences of student during the 2010 academic year. However, the interviews were conducted in February and March on the 2011 academic year. One must be open to the possibility that participant would have possibly had more depth

and accuracy on many of their responses. I believe that, had the interviews been done during the course of the year, I would have had more substance on the subjects at hand.

3. Inference

The data for this study was collected from nine (9) participants from seven (7) clusters of student organisations. The results and conclusions of this study cannot be generalised to a) The whole student organisation population and b) The whole student population at the university and in other universities. However, through the data collected we are made aware of legitimate student experiences at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

4. Causalities

It must come out this is a non-experimental study. Any link between one variable and the other is not meant to project or suggest any causal like between them. This study is an exploratory study and is only meant to attempt to understand the experiences of students in a non calculative manner.

5. Sample is only people who are highly involved

The sample of this study was students who occupied leadership positions in their respective student organisations. These people are highly involved in their organisation. In as much as this gives us much strengths that outweigh weaknesses, it must be noted that there may be certain personality traits and characteristics that would perhaps influence the need for people to get involved. As such, their experiences may not be the experience of a less active members or members active but not in leadership positions.

8. Recommendations

This research recommends the following:

1. That an investigation be initiated about the level of sense of community in the general community at Wits using a quantitaive approach.
2. That a study of culture, perhaps from an Anthropological stance, be initiated and understood in the context of the apathy at Wits and the sense of community.
3. That the experiences of stress also be measured quantitatively amongst the general student organisation community. This can be done separate for leaders, active members and members to understand where the greater challenge lies.
4. That success probabilities between students involved in student organisations and those that are not involved be comparatively investigated understand the dynamics of success.
5. That more studies be done to understand the dynamics of success in higher education to deal with the poor success rate in universities.

9. Conclusion

Student organisations comprise of an integral sector of the student populace. Active membership in these organisations is usually associated with a variety of benefits. However, students that are actively involved in such organisations expressed that there are many disadvantaged also associated with being active membership. This includes the conflict of time by both academic work and student organisation commitments. Students active in student organisations were then noted to experience a heightened amount of stress. There are various ways that they experience strain. However, this is due to academic work and student organisation work. There also seems to be no mechanism of dealing with this challenge by these students. This was noted to be a very concerning state of affairs.

It is apparent that the levels of sense of community, judging by the experiences of the participants, may be low. Many factors may contribute to this, according to students. As a result of the understanding of sense of community, the study is was unable to evaluate how sense of community, in substance influences students coping mechanisms. However, through the responses of the participants, one is able to understand the experiences of students in the Wits community

This study, I believe, dealt with certain factors forgotten or overlooked in student experiences of student organisations. It also dealt with certain suppressed issues that speak some real life experiences of students in this community and other similar communities. If you listen to it carefully, you will hear it. It calls for action from those who have the power to change the status quo. Over and above the criticisms that may come in response to this paper, one must remember that the expressions and experiences of students were not fabricated and there can be no better articulation of reality but from the students themselves.

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