THE DANCE OF THE POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES OF LIFE: STUDENT WELLBEING IN THE CONTEXT OF #FEESMUSTFALL-RELATED VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

Violence has become a regular occurrence in the context of the South African student movement. However, to date there are no studies that investigate student wellbeing in the context of student movement violence. How are violence and wellbeing experienced in the context of the student movement? What resources do students draw upon to protect or restore their wellbeing during and in the aftermath of violence? This article discusses students' experiences of violence and wellbeing and particularly the resources that fostered their psychological wellbeing during and after experiences of violence related to the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015/16. The study used a photovoice methodology and worked with groups of former student activists from four universities in South Africa. Student psychological functioning in the midst of adverse circumstances is

demonstrated in their ability to make meaning of their experiences by inventing knowledge spaces; creating spaces of inner harmony; having a sense of purpose; and protecting symbolic spaces of hope. It is also shown in their courage to challenge spaces of oppression. This study suggests that the co-production of social space for functioning occurs through an important psychological process of meaning-making that provides direction for student movement activities. Given our findings, it is recommended for student affairs and counselling services to m,./=-09864 facilitate the co-creation of spaces of knowledge and spaces of safety, spaces where students can experience being wanted and connected, and spaces where they can make sense of their experiences in the unfamiliar and potentially alienating higher education space.

Keywords: #FeesMustFall, higher education, protest, social space, space, student activism, student experience, student movement, violence, wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

Ideally, the educational experience should be free of violence of any kind. The detrimental impacts of violence on learning are evident in research involving learners at all levels of education, among majority and minority group students, in various contexts, and with respect to different forms of violence (Isaacs and Savahl 2014, 269; Raats et al. 2019, 736). Conversely, wellbeing as defined in positive psychology comprises the experience of positive emotion, psychological functioning, and the absence of negative feelings (Huta and Waterman 2014, 1427–1430), and it has an overwhelmingly positive effect on learning (Amholt et al. 2020, 1541). Students who are socially well-integrated and adequately supported and resourced, show higher levels of student engagement which, in turn, correlates positively with academic achievement (Strydom, Kuh, and Loots 2017; Tinto 2014, 8).

Over the past decade, South African public universities have become hotbeds of recurring and frequently violent student protests. This was the case even well before the famed #FeesMustFall campaigns of 2015 and 2016 (Langa 2017, 6; Luescher, Webbstock, and Bhengu 2020, 2). Student protests have typically addressed a set of recurring grievances, particularly in relation to the academic and financial exclusion of students, student funding and accommodation, matters of institutional culture, language, and governance (Luescher et al. 2020, 2). Seeing that historically black universities, rural universities, and universities of technology in South Africa have a greater share of the poor and working class students who are more affected by financial woes and institutional dysfunction, it is in these universities that violent student protests have become part of the institutions' genealogy (Langa 2017).

During the 2015/16 wave of #FeesMustFall-related protests, violence was attributed to various agents. Sutton (2019) argues that for students, violence was a channel to communicate their message of discontent as they felt that their voices were not being heard. Langa found that in nine universities he had studied, the police was blamed for instigating violence during

#FeesMustFall; only in some instances were students also named as responsible for fuelling violence. Moreover, in all nine cases it was found that "violence increased when the police were called and stationed within university grounds" (Langa 2017). It is a well-known finding in research on student politics that "the violent repression of student activism is often a factor in 'increasing both the size and the militancy' of activist movements" (Luescher 2018, 311; also see Altbach 1991) and may eventually lead to the creation of a student political "culture of violence" (Nkomo 1984). During the #FeesMustFall 2015 and 2016 campaigns, police and private security contractors were typically called onto campuses by university management to protect university property from students. Conversely, students felt justified in their activism as part of "their quest to restore their dignity through free, decolonised education" (Langa 2017, 8).

While violence is understood primarily as the (physical) exertion of extreme force against a person or object, which results in harm or destruction (Khanyile 2020, there are more ways in which the notion of violence has been used in the context of the South African student movement and the student experience of higher education. Cornell, Ratele, and Kessi (2016, 101) argued that especially black, female, and LGBTIQ students experience both symbolic and physical violence on university campuses. Symbolic violence relates to structural and/or cultural violence that is used to legitimise direct, physical violence (Parsons 2007, 174–175). Both forms of violence – symbolic and physical – have a negative effect on the mental health of observers, perpetrators and victims, with studies pointing to increased risk of psychological disorders such as depression (Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill 2017, 2). While most acknowledge the negative impacts of violence (Pule 2017, 268; Savahl et al. 2015, 222; Tsai et al. 2016, 10), some studies also point to the potential of violence generating or activating psychological resources that can enhance wellbeing during such negative experiences (Schmid and Muldoon 2015, 86; Vollhardt, Mazur, and Lemahieu 2014, 315). These resources may include the realisation of personal strengths and external support linked to a sense of fulfilment and purpose (Huta and Ryan 2010, 759; Park, Peterson, and Seligman 2006).

Understanding the experience of psychological wellbeing in a context where individuals are either perpetrators, witnesses, or victims of violence is an understudied area. A reason for this is that psychological wellbeing research often focuses only on the positives of life, without exploring the negatives (Lomas and Ivtzan 2016, 1754), thus missing out on what we may call the dance of the positives and the negatives in the pursuit of wellbeing. Work on violence therefore tends to be undertaken from a pathological perspective and neglects to study the indicators of functioning that may mitigate or ameliorate the effects of this violence. At the same time, there is a distinct call for critical research into students' experiences of the

challenges they face in higher education institutions in South Africa (Ashwin and Case 2018, 133). Especially, there is a need to examine the higher education space to help break the cycle of violence that students experience and place student experiences central in transformation and decolonial debates (Cornell et al. 2016, 99; Watson and Widin 2015, 658–659).

By using a psychological wellbeing lens to explore students' experiences of violence during and in the aftermath of the 2015/16 student movement, we hope to contribute to addressing both of these gaps. We seek to hear from former participants in the student movement about that which may be empowering to students and discover how various indicators of functioning work to serve as protective factors against the negative effects of exposure to violence. Thus, our research objectives are as follows:

- To explore indicators of psychological functioning in the narratives of students who experienced violence in the context of the 2015/16 student movement in South Africa.
- To demonstrate how the indicators of functioning serve as protective mechanisms that foster students' psychological wellbeing during and after exposure to violence.

We proceed by outlining in more detail our theoretical lens for studying psychological wellbeing in the context of violence. This is followed by our description and justification of the novel rapid photovoice methodology. In the results section, we present and discuss the narratives and related photographs that emanated from the research project across four universities in 2019 and 2020.

STUDYING PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

Broadly categorised, wellbeing is studied as indicators of hedonic wellbeing that includes feelings of happiness, pleasure, cheerfulness, enjoyment, and absence of discomfort (Diener, Inglehart, and Tay 2013), and of eudaimonic (psychological) wellbeing, which refers to human activity that reflects virtue, excellence, the best within people, and the full development of their potential (Huta and Waterman 2014; Joshanloo 2016; Waterman 2013). In addition, psychological wellbeing research seeks to explore resources, strengths, and experiences that promote positive states in different contexts (Seligman 2011, 28).

The components of psychological wellbeing according to Ryff and Singer (2008, 25) comprise:

> "(1) the extent to which an individual feels their lives have meaning, purpose and direction (purpose in life); (2) whether they viewed themselves to be living in accordance with their own

personal convictions (autonomy); (3) the extent to which they were making use of their personal talents and potential (personal growth); (4) how well they were managing their life situations (environmental mastery); (5) the depth of connection they had in ties with significant others (positive relationships), and (6) the knowledge and acceptance they had of themselves, including awareness of personal limitations (self-acceptance)."

Psychological wellbeing involves what an individual requires to function adequately in different life domains. In this study, we determine how psychological wellbeing as an indicator of functioning might manifest in the context of the student movement, and how it may facilitate change in South African higher education institutions. This approach is particularly useful because it explores how the student movement might be driven by a personal sense of purpose as well as the likely lessened impact of violence due to deep connections with significant others (Glasius and Pleyers 2013). A psychological wellbeing perspective in understanding student experiences might reveal how the student movement provides a platform for an individual to acquire and practise leadership skills, listening, and critical thinking.

Furthermore, it has become particularly important to understand positive experiences that foster wellbeing in contexts where other health-facilitating environmental factors are absent and risk factors are prominent. One such risk is the experience of violence (Sabina and Banyard 2015). Previous research on student movement-related violence focused on motivations for engaging in violent protests (Morwe, García España, and Luescher 2020) and the experience of victimisation, without tapping into indicators of functioning that might ameliorate effects of the prevailing violence.

The dance of the positives and negatives of life: psychological wellbeing and violence

The second wave of positive psychology has brought a growing appreciation of a dual-systems model that recognises the complex interactions between the positive and negative experiences of life that are expressed in an individual's thinking patterns, feelings, and behaviour under various circumstances (Lomas and Ivtzan 2016; Wong 2011). Positive psychology, a paradigm underlying our study of wellbeing, provides an alternative lens for understanding student experiences of violence. Applying this model, we aim to interrogate the complexities associated with student movement actions that result in violence and the associated protective mechanisms or wellbeing resources that allow for an experience of wellbeing. One of these complexities is social identification. Social identification refers to the extent to which individuals self-identify with members of their in-group. Scholarly work on violence and psychological wellbeing has revealed that although extant evidence points to violence leading to poorer wellbeing, perceived

inter-group threats can indirectly improve wellbeing through social identification (Jetten, Haslam, and Haslam 2012; Schmid and Muldoon 2015). It has been argued that increased social identification reduces the adverse effects of perceived threat. In essence, given the relationship between perceived threat and social identification, the former may also be indirectly and positively associated with better psychological wellbeing. However, it is not expected that the effect of perceived threat on psychological wellbeing will be universal, and we argue that the extent to which intergroup threat affects psychological wellbeing depends on the individual and the context of conflict or violent experiences.

In a similar study, it was found that participants who acknowledged the negative experience of violence experienced an improvement in their psychological wellbeing because it reduced the likelihood of post-traumatic stress (Forstmeier et al. 2009). Moreover, research has shown that when minority group members acknowledge, emphasise, and reinforce group identities, they tend to experience increased positive affect (Flores and Huo 2013, 147). It is nonetheless essential to point out that evidence supporting this claim is minimal. Acknowledgement of group identity might be responsible for promoting wellbeing because it creates a pathway towards social cohesion and meaning-making of a particular event. These processes have been found to enhance psychological wellbeing (see Steger 2018, 4–6). Acknowledgment may also validate the group's experiences (Wohl, Hornsey, and Philpot 2011, 90) and enhance collective self-esteem, thereby empowering previously disempowered victim groups (Shnabel and Nadler 2008, 129; Staub 2008).

Understanding the indicators of wellbeing and functioning may help to protect against a sense of victimisation and build resilience. To our knowledge, there is little evidence in student movement research that articulates the indicators of wellbeing during experiences of violence. For instance, how does social identification or mastery of the university space (as a type of environmental mastery) during student protests serve as a resource for students as they attempt to articulate their grievances and demands to university management? This study hopes to address this critical gap in research. We also argue that it is necessary to explore indicators other than social identification and acknowledgement that might be empowering to students, as well as to discover how they work to serve as protective factors against the effects of violence. Thus, in this study, we explore the indicators of psychological functioning among students in the context of the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall student movement across four higher education institutions in South Africa.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to explore student wellbeing across four different, far-flung university campuses in

South Africa, we adapted the photovoice method. Photovoice is an action research method that documents a matter affecting a community by means of photographs taken by community members. It uses a setting like a workshop, focus group or interview setting to discuss the identified matters, and eventually presents the photographs to photovoice participants themselves and others with the ultimate purpose of seeking improvements in the community (Wang and Burris 1997, 369–370). The methodology comprises training in photography and related ethics, the use of photos as a means to develop a voice on a particular matter, critical discussions among participants, and the generation and articulation of experiential knowledge. This is because participants deliberate on and relay their community's concerns to expose for instance social problems and push for transformation (Sutton-Brown 2020). We adapted this methodology to work with student participants on their campus sites over the course of several days in a way that we describe elsewhere in detail as "rapid photovoice" (Luescher et al. 2021). We chose this methodology because of its ability to demonstrate social problems in a persuasive and non-threatening manner.

Our conceptualisation of photovoice is termed rapid photovoice (RPV) mainly because the time allocation for the workshop sessions – introductions, training, data gathering, discussion and reflection, and an initial presentation of the results – was compressed to three days. Other projects that use photovoice ordinarily take from between a week to several months to implement these steps. Our study, by contrast, executed the core of the process in a continuous, intensive three-day series of ten sessions of data gathering and collective reflection. Using RPV still enabled us to critically examine students' experiences in relation to power as well as their interests, while it also fostered trust in the course of the research (see Luescher et al. 2021). Moreover, the three-day intensive series of workshops were preceded and followed by continuous engagement with the student participants especially in order to build a good rapport ahead of the workshops and to collectively present the students' concerns and advocating together for change afterwards.

Regarding issues of power, although university students may not generally be considered a disadvantaged group, in the context of a university community they are typically the youngest and most junior members with the least authority and the least discursive power (Luescher-Mamashela 2013, 1450), hence necessitating the use of innovative methodologies such as the RPV as a research-based platform for them to authoritatively articulate their experiences and grievances. The RPV process of critical dialogue in a safe space afforded the students the opportunity to explore the matters that gave rise to protest on the respective campuses, and consider the genesis of student movement-related violence. It also allowed us to delve deeper into those aspects of their experiences that served as protective mechanisms that enabled the

students' to cope with violence and eventually to thrive – despite the negative experiences that they had become party to.

Participants

Participants were selected according to several criteria and through a variety of methods. A multi-stage purposive sampling technique was used. Firstly, we purposively selected four public higher education institutions from among the most violence-prone institutions in the country. They were also selected to reflect some of the diversity in the sector in terms of their geographic location (urban/rural) and institutional history (historically black/white). The four institutions that were selected were the University of Fort Hare in Alice (Eastern Cape), the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein/Mangaung (Free State), the University of Venda in Thohoyandou (Limpopo), and the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town (Western Cape).

Secondly, participants were selected from each of these institutions to participate in institution-specific, face-to-face photovoice workshops on their respective campuses. A criterion for participation was that the students needed to have experienced violent student protests on their campus, whether as observers, victims, or perpetrators of violence during the 2015/16 #FeesMustFall-related student protests. Some participants were identified from their involvement in their university's students' representative council at the time; others were referred to the researchers by student affairs professionals; and others again were identified by referrals from student activists. The potential participants were then approached via email with the details of the study and asked to indicate their interest in being part of the study. A total of 27 participants across the four institutions were recruited to participate in the study. All but one participant were black students, and the majority (17 of 27) were male. All participants were undergraduate students during the 2015/16 student movement.

Data gathering

After obtaining ethics clearance as well as institutional permission to conduct research on campus with students from the respective institutions, participant recruitment started. The campus-based photovoice workshops were organised as three consecutive days of research with a team of three researchers and a photographer on each campus. We visited each campus and conducted the workshops between September 2019 and February 2020. Altogether, the three-day workshops were divided into nine sessions of photovoice workshops and a World Cafe event.

On Day 1, participants were taken through a session where they learnt about photovoice,

the reason for using this method for the present study, and discussed the goals of the study. Next, they were trained to capture pictures on campus that portray their experience of violence as well as of wellbeing resources adopted during the 2015/2016 student movement. Participants proceeded to document their experiences by either taking photographs or recovering existing pictures that captured their experiences. Each participant could provide a maximum of five photos. Day 2 started with a debriefing of the photo collection experience followed by a critical dialogue session where participants discussed with the researchers how the photos that they presented related to their experiences of violence and wellbeing. Day 3 was designed as another debriefing and as the day of the campus-based exhibition. Based on their reflections of their experiences of violence and wellbeing, the participants provided captions and short narratives to accompany each of their photos and set them up as an exhibition. For the exhibition, some members of the university authorities, typically student affairs practitioners, senior academics and academic managers, were invited to participate in a World Cafe event. Eventually, the exhibition was followed by a final discussion and de-briefing with the participants on their overall experience of the three-day workshop.[1] All sessions were recorded with a digital voice-recording device.

To ensure that the RPV succeeded in fulfilling the fundamental aims of creating a sense of empowerment, creating trust and co-creating knowledge, the research team administered a survey as part of the post-workshop engagements with participants to learn from participants about their experience of the process. Students indicated that they valued the opportunity to articulate their experiences in multiple, complementary ways as this allowed a more authentic representation of their voices. They also believed that the post-workshop engagement had the potential to influence higher education policy. The twenty students who responded to the evaluation survey experienced RPV as empowering and as allowing them to reflect on and represent their experiences through a process of collective engagement.

The study required a safe space to share potentially traumatic and difficult experiences. In the evaluation survey, students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "I found the photovoice workshop warm and receptive and non-judgemental". Furthermore, despite the "rapidity" of the RPV methodology, a majority of students (14 of 20) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "The days we spent on doing photovoice was enough time".

As required in any photovoice method, the pre-data collection activities helped to create a trusting environment. Some of the time was spent with present and former student activists discussing political matters as well as their grievances and the lack of responsiveness of university authorities. These discussions outside the actual data collection provided the rapport and safe space to delve deeper into the topic of violence and wellbeing. All the respondents to

the workshop evaluation agreed with the statement, "I felt comfortable to open up about my experiences of violence". Trust was also established because of the wellbeing lens used to understand this. The emphasis on processing experiences of violence in order to restore wellbeing signalled that the research team was taking the students' experiences seriously and was genuinely concerned for their mental health (for details see, Luescher et al. 2021).

Data analyses

In accordance with photovoice methodology, the photos provided by participants were analysed during the second and third day of the three-day research workshop with the participants collaborating as co-researchers and not just informants. After the workshops, the researchers analysed the transcripts of the discussions using Atlas.ti. The method of thematic content analysis was adopted (Creswell and Poth 2016). This involved organising the transcribed data, followed by reading through it several times in order to become immersed in the content and find patterns and form codes. These code reports were analysed and grouped further into categories and themes. Three researchers carried out a process of co-coding to enhance the reliability of the findings. Data checking was done by soliciting participants' views on the credibility of findings and interpretations (compare Morse 2015, 1216). The findings presented in this article are only those from the photovoice sessions (Day 1 and Day 2). Findings are presented as themes and they are accompanied by excerpts from transcripts and photos.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the nationally accredited ethics committee of the Human Sciences Research Council (REC 2/18/04/18c, 8 March 2019). In addition, institutional permission to conduct research was received from each of the universities selected for the study. Participants who volunteered to partake in the study were duly informed of its aims and purposes. A comprehensive information guide was sent to each of them ahead of the workshops and this was workshopped in the introductory session of Day 1. Thus, informed consent was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection. Additional consent was obtained from participants to use their photos in scientific outputs and to include photos that would otherwise violate the rules of anonymity, such as selfies. Photos with non-consenting participants were not used in this study unless they were already in the public domain and consent to use was obtained from the photographer who had copyrights to the pictures. Other ethical considerations and processes are discussed in detail in Luescher et al. (2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our purpose in this section is to identify indicators of healthy functioning from the photovoice

records, including the excerpts from discussions at workshops, photos and captions generated with the student participants. As discussed earlier, such indicators can include but are not limited to a sense of purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships, and self-acceptance (Ryff and Singer 2008, 25). We therefore present such elements of eudaimonic wellbeing as manifest in the data. Our findings from the workshops with the students show how (1) different kinds of social, personal and knowledge spaces, (2) mastery and a sense of direction, as well as (3) challenging gendered spaces, all serve as protective mechanisms and indicators of healthy functioning in the context of violent experiences. We adopt the concept of space as one that is socially produced through interactions between students, university management and physical places in higher education institutions (Lefebvre 2003; Tumubweinee and Luescher 2019).

Knowledge spaces and meaning-making

During the movement, students from different partisan organisations who would normally compete with each other came together to engage and discuss ways to advance social justice and transformation. During such meetings, they educated one another about the ideology of their respective organisations and the principles championed by the student movement. They also encouraged everyone to remain steadfast when facing the challenges that come with student activism. In the excerpt that follows, a student explains that being knowledgeable in an ideology helps to support their work as activists.

> "What kept us going was the fact that we drew our inspiration from Frantz Fanon when he said that 'each generation must discover its own generational mission, either fulfil it or betray it'. [...] In the apartheid era they fought their own mission. Now we're also going towards our own generational mission which is free, quality and decolonised education." (Univen Male Participant, October 2019).

Photo 1 captures the gathering of students in the TV room of a student residence as one of the activists teaches about Pan Africanism. Notions of blackness, the teachings of Robert Sobukwe, Steve Bantu Biko, and Black Consciousness, decolonisation theories and so forth, were all prominent in these teach-ins (see Maringira and Gukurume 2016, 40). This participant from UWC captioned his photo "The focal point of conscientisation" (see Photo 1).

Identifying knowledge spaces (created by students for students) as an indicator of functioning or protective mechanism is related to the fact that such spaces allow individuals to make sense (meaning) of the difficulties they experience on university campuses. The process of meaning-making of one's lived experience is a central component of eudaimonic wellbeing;

it allows students to identify the major source of difficulties on campuses and the means to address these. This interactive process of transforming an ordinary physical place and abstract space into a social space that serves as wellbeing resource is grounded in identifying value systems that shape an individual's outlook on life while providing direction for several courses of action.

Photo 1: The focal point of conscientisation – UWC male participant, September 2019

Spaces of strength as mastery of the university context

In addition to students' knowledge spaces, we identified spaces of strength as another type of social space where participants organised themselves to respond to the violences they experienced on campus. These were either on-campus or off-campuses spaces where students gathered to debrief one another, reflect after a protest, strategise for the next engagement, or just to "get away from it all". An example of an on-campus space of strength was the so-called sports complex at the UFH (see Photo 2). A female student of the UFH suggested that the space had been aptly named, as it was indeed a complex space used for important university occasions such as registration, graduations, career guidance fairs, in addition to being primarily a sports hall. During the #FeesMustFall protests, it was also a place where activists would meet and strategise.

Having in mind that the university had become a violent space teaming with armed riot police and private security that patrolled the university in warlike formations (Woodward, Jenkings, and Williams 2017), it was important for students to have places on campus where they could meet and reflect. The sports complex was such a place where students would come

together, share their experiences, and strategise on the way forward. Participants also identified off-campus sites that they would retreat to in order to tune out all the noise, and for ideological

Photo 2: Complex sports complex – UFH female participant, February 2020

and political training. One such example is a place in the largest black township of Cape Town, Khayelitsha, where several participants from UWC indicated they had found "a family".

> "How I dealt with the experiences and all of those things, it was thanks to people, because at such times, they came with their black theology, you know. There was a space then for us created in Khayelitsha, where we would go to think." (UWC Male Participant, September 2019)

Functioning and thriving came about from having a familiar, non-threatening place where the student activists could speak together about their experiences and reflect in order to heal. This experience is associated with environmental mastery, where an individual was able to manage difficult situations, create or actively change their environment to meet their individual needs. Students identified and transformed university campus spaces to meet their student movement needs. More so, communities outside the university provided the needed space for reflection and healing such as in Kilomobo, Khayelitsha, in the case of our study. Ryff (2014, 14) argues for the role of environmental mastery in fostering wellbeing in the context of adversity, indicating that eudaimonic attributes serve as resilient and protective factors that enable individuals to grow, develop their personal capacities and thrive when faced with difficult life experiences.

In addition to spaces on and off university campuses that the students regarded as spaces

of strength, there were instances where students used art to create spaces of strength. At the UFS, for example, a permanent art installation (inspired by Thabang Selai's Braamfontein bottle cap artwork – see Photo 3) was noted by a participant as a space that transformed the violence of the space itself and as a space from which he derived strength.

> "So, art seems to be the best medium of communication outside of literal protest which doesn't happen every day .... Because if the space exists as a function of violence, then we're only going to get rid of that violence by changing the space itself, not just those who occupy it." (UFS Male Participant, October 2019).
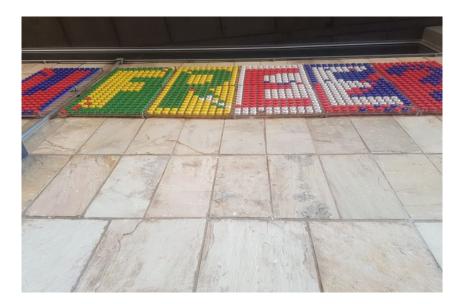

Photo 3: Are you free? – UFS male participant, October 2019

Hideouts of refuge and inner harmony

A third type of space that participants identified were specific hideouts in which they sought refuge; they too served as protective mechanisms to ensure psychological functioning. Unlike spaces of knowledge and strength they were not shared, but were used as individualised localities to retreat to from the activities on campus. Several participants indicated that their rooms – whether they were in campus student residences or outside campus – provided a haven, a place of serenity and security to retreat to from student movement-related violence. One participant recounted that after all the running around, looting and burning, she looked forward to the quietness of her room.

> "That's what I do when maybe I come back from strike. I come back to my room. I just bath and then just stay lazing around. Hence yesterday I said that when we are striking on campus, I always relax ... 'So, I think it symbolising the fact that, hey, I can chillax. I can just be me, ja'." (UFH Female participant, February 2020).

The need for a sense of safety is also captured in excerpts where students talk about finding solace in books within the walls of their rooms on campus. This notion is illustrated in Photo 4 and the accompanying excerpt.
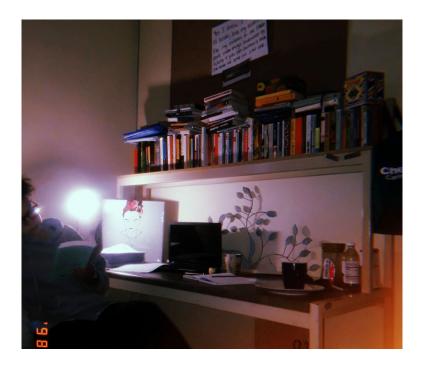

Photo 4: Divine communion – UFS female participant, October 2019

> "I need to educate myself, surround myself with the work of scholars and thinkers, so that I can process my experiences, gain healing from this act of processing, and obtain fuel and insight to continue the fight." (UFS Female Participant, October 2019).

The student experience narrated and captured in Photo 4 shows the need for an opportunity to heal, process, and prepare for another fight. The identified space allows for further learning, self-awareness, and healing, all of which are necessary for wellbeing. Delle Fave et al. (2016, 5) argue that inner harmony is important for psychological wellbeing, and Kjell and Diener (2020) indicate that wellbeing is fostered in a peaceful and balanced context. It appears that students in our study were able to continue functioning while agitating for transformation in an increasingly violent context – inter alia because they could carve out spaces of personal refuge and requiem.

Protecting the university space as a pathway to a sense of direction

It was interesting to see the extent to which the students in our study were cognisant of the social and class/race divisions in South Africa, along with the sexism, homophobia, crime and other social ills that afflict the country, which are sadly also reflected in higher education

spaces. This awareness and a commitment to change served as the motivation for many students in our study. With the picture from the UFH in Photo 5, a participant sought to illustrate how the need for change set the stage for her purpose-driven behaviours to see transformation happen in the university.

Photo 5: Intellectual torment – UFH female participant, February 2020

Photo 5 titled "Intellectual torment" is that of Fort Hare's university library. According to the participant who shared this picture, the building serves as a pathway to achieving academic success, and to fight for such resources to be accessible to current and future students was a motivation for her to participate in #FeesMustFall. She said: "This picture represents a space that gives me the faith that my dreams can be realised". Hence, she was also anxious during protests that the library might be burnt down. She therefore saw her role as activist and chaperone, fighting for the cause while protecting key resources from more militant students who might attack those resources. This gave her activist involvement a strong sense of direction, which is an indicator of functioning.

A female participant from UWC argued that most students on her campus did not understand the call for free education and tended to ask questions on the viability of free education. For her, a proper appreciation of the socio-political landscape of South Africa and the university engendered a sense of direction to fight for free education. The drive to change the existing social structures for the benefit of future generations gave her a sense of purpose.

This served as a protective psychological mechanism even during the most difficult times on campus when students were brutalised by the police.

> "They [other students] were like, 'Who is going to pay for them? Where is the money going to come from? South Africa is a poor country', and all that. So, the importance of knowing what's going on, it's key. Because it also gives us direction. It also gives us direction as to, in the midst of everything that is happening, this is how we should respond to it. These are the things that should be happening." (UWC Female Participant, September 2019).

As a protective psychological experience, a sense of direction is one of the ways an individual is able to make meaning of complex situations (Martela and Steger 2016, 534). Relatedly, Luescher, Loader, and Mugume (2017, 241) posit that both the physical and virtual elements of a digitally networked student movement such as #FeesMustFall have the potential of promoting a common sense of being, while providing a sense of direction rooted in its ideological sophistication. Using Appadurai's concept of cultural capacity, Ngidi et al. (2016, 4–5) argue that students' narratives point to the ability to aspire to better futures in which disadvantaged groups can make their voices heard, with such aspirations promoting a sense of direction.

Challenging gendered spaces through navigational adaptability

Leadership in student movements in South Africa tend to reflect patriarchal values; hence, there was the need to challenge sexism on university campuses. We found that among activists at UWC, feminism emerged as one of the pillars of the student movement. However, the experience of one of the female activists was that she had to navigate and adapt to a male-dominated space while fighting against sexism. In the excerpt that follows, we capture a female student's ability to recognise, navigate, and adapt to the male-dominated space by taking up leadership roles despite the odds.

> "So, this is the true depiction of this space, of how male-dominated it was. And I think it also shows where this resistance of accepting feminism then came from, because it was a very difficult space to accept. I mean we had to struggle. You can imagine, in a space where male voices are dominant and then you want to have feminism as one of the pillars. So, it was really difficult for us, for the rest of the comrades to accept feminism as one of the pillars." (UWC Female Participant, September 2019).

In Photo 6, we demonstrate the student's ability to navigate male-dominated spaces by recognising its existence and developing ways to adapt while attempting to enforce the needed change by taking up a leadership position in the group. This ability points to functioning against

the odds of sexism as part of the student movement experience. As Tumubweinee and Luescher (2019, 5–6) argue, the gendered characteristics of this particular space influenced what students needed to do to transform it, while ensuring that they are able to thrive and function adequately.

Photo 6: Mobilise, educate and strive – UWC female participant, September 2019

In our quest to understand the experiences and indicators of functioning, our study points to navigational adaptability that enables students to not only cope with sexism in the movement, but to find ways of thriving as depicted in the leadership role adopted by the female UWC student. This navigational adaptability resonates with environmental mastery that allows for adaptive coping within/with? the demands of the university context (Freire et al. 2016, 2; Otero-López et al., 2014, 102). Ryff (2018, 242–248) argues that environmental mastery allows an individual to create a fit between their inner and outer world by manipulating complex environments. Mastery also comes with the capacity to act on and change the surrounding world through mental and physical activities. Environmental mastery as an expression of an individual's ability to manage the situation in which they live (Ryff and Singer 2008, 23) is reflected in the student's ability to navigate the male-dominated space and establish feminism as one of the pillars of the student movement. Forstmeier et al. (2009, 1036–1038) argued that meaning-making that is derived from accurate recognition of issues that require change, serves as an internal mechanism that mediates the effect of external stressors and increases the experience of wellbeing.

LIMITATIONS
Given the principles of participatory approaches towards research that require prolonged engagement with the community of participants, a limitation in our study was the length of the

workshops. We were nevertheless careful to ensure that the standard practice for such research was upheld in our RPV technique. As much as participants did provide positive reflections of their feelings of ownership, empowerment and engagement with the project as reported in the survey we conducted, we are cognisant of the limitations of RPV in terms of the involvement of participants in the co-designing and development of the project. A critical reflection on the methodological process and limitations has been reported in detail elsewhere (see Luescher et al. 2021) and as a result is not fully represented in this article.

As a research team, we reflected on the nature of photographs provided by students, but it might be argued that these are not provocative enough to warrant the use of this methodology. However, the fact that they represent participants' feelings and experiences of difficult issues of violence, power, and trust, we argue that these pictures were a good conduit for understanding the students' point of view. We also opine that trying to ask about wellbeing in the context of student movement in South Africa required the use of creative methodologies such as our rapid photovoice.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study set out to investigate indicators of functioning that served as protective psychological mechanisms in the context of the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall student movement. We provided an argument for the use of a psychological wellbeing lens to understand violent experiences among students in four higher education institutions in South Africa. Following the second wave of positive psychology that examines how the field is developing, a more subtle understanding of the dialectical nature of flourishing involving a complex and dynamic interplay of positive and negative experiences – a dance of the positives and negatives of life – we looked out for indicators that pointed to student functioning during experiences of violence. We paid particular attention to the construction and conceptualisation of social space (see Tumubweinee and Luescher 2019) as a process through which students were able to function and do well in the context of student movement-related violence.

Central to our findings were indicators of functioning such as the ability to create meaning through engagement in knowledge spaces; create spaces of strength as mastery and management of the environment; the identification of hideouts of refuge that provide inner harmony; having a sense of purpose to protect symbolic spaces of hope; and the courage to challenge spaces of oppression.

Our findings demonstrate the need to look at higher education as a social system that arranges people in a space, with the relationships between students and the university being social co-products of different actors. We identified specific behaviours among students that

create, challenge, and protect differently conceived spaces as indicators of individual functioning in the higher education context.

The process of meaning-making appears central in the co-production of the above-mentioned social spaces, while the protection of existing resourceful university spaces provides the needed sense of direction and purpose for student movement activities. We show that the engagement with social spaces is also a psychological process of the interaction between meanings that different actors attach to their social world. Adding to wellbeing literature (Martela and Steger 2016) in the higher education context, student wellbeing develops in spaces that are created in interaction with other actors, yet strongly interwoven with internalised processes of meaning-making.

In conclusion, we raise questions on the role of institutions in fostering student wellbeing, while taking into account the embeddedness of the challenges that lead to student movement activities. As much as we advocate and explore individualised indicators of functioning, the concept of co-creation of spaces necessitates a social justice approach (Hart et al. 2016, 5) that makes systems and societies equally responsible for individual wellbeing. Institutions can still be held accountable for promoting psychological functioning. Reflecting on the negative impact of violent student movement activities and the protective resource inherent in psychological functioning, we advocate that higher education institutions should take steps to ameliorate the negative impacts of such movements on student wellbeing. What appears key is the co-creation of new spaces of engagement with students that will ensure that demands from students are articulated and handled timeously so as to prevent violent altercations. Furthermore, student affairs practitioners in particular should facilitate the co-creation of spaces of knowledge and spaces of safety, spaces where students can experience being wanted and connected, and spaces where they can make sense of their experiences in a higher education space that is often experienced as unfamiliar, alien and even threatening.

Future research could expand on our findings by including different South African institutions and students to explore on the one hand, the co-production of social spaces and their role in psychological wellbeing, and the place of violence in the student movement and its wellbeing impact on other members of the university community, such as academics, student affairs practitioners, and university managers, as well as members of the police service and security services. It is also imperative to explore and understand the dialectical relationship between the positives and negatives of life further. Finally, innovative methodologies are needed to critically engage with students on difficult issues around power dynamics in higher education institutions. In the context of the South African study – where the situation is further compounded by race, poverty, inequality, and high levels of violence in general and gender-

based violence in particular – it is important to use photovoice and similar critical participatory research approaches, while considering real-world challenges such as time, participant availability, and research capacity.

FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

PHOTO PERMISSIONS

All photos reproduced in this article were supplied by student participants during photovoice workshops in 2019 and 2020 and are reproduced with their consent.

- Photo 1: The focal point of conscientisation: Consent, UWC male participant, September 2019; picture taken by a friend of the photovoice participant, retrieved from student participant's own Facebook timeline (public domain).
- Photo 2: Complex sports complex – Consent, UFH female participant, February 2020; own picture of photovoice participant from personal archive.
- Photo 3: Are you free? – Consent, UFS male participant, October 2019; own picture of photovoice participant from personal archive.
- Photo 4: Divine communion – Consent, UFS female participant, October 2019; own picture of photovoice participant taken for the purpose of photovoice project.
- Photo 5: Intellectual torment – Consent, UFH female participant, February 2020; own picture of photovoice participant taken for the purpose of photovoice project.
- Photo 6: Mobilise, educate and strive – Consent, UWC female participant, September 2019; picture taken by a friend of the photovoice participant, retrieved from student participant's own Facebook timeline (public domain).

NOTE

1. The rapid photovoice method used in the research across the four institutions is described in greater detail and critically discussed in Luescher et al. (2021).

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