

Students are humans too: Psychosocial vulnerability of first-year students at the University of Johannesburg

This paper aims to describe the life challenges university students experienced in their first year of study during the transition into academia, how these impacted on their studies at the time, and how these have impacted on their life satisfaction and academic progress over the next year or two. Data were collected using a quantitative survey instrument from 463 second and third year students at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Results showed that prevalent and severe life challenges during the first year of study were the death of loved ones and poverty. Most of the life challenges impacted negatively on academic progress and well-being a year or two later, and in combination the pileup of vulnerability in first year has a sustained negative impact on student's academic progress year a year or two later. Universities need to engage with the whole student as human within their social environment, with both academic and personal development needs.

Keywords: university students; adversity; life challenges; trauma; violence; youth transitions

Accepted for publication in 2017 in *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 31(5), 246-262

Introduction

Research among South African university students shows them to experience high levels of psychosocial vulnerability that can have a direct impact on their academic success (Van Breda 2013, Wade 2009, McGowan and Kagee 2013). The surge in student action related to colonisation and student fees in the latter part of 2015 and into 2016 reflects high levels of student dissatisfaction with society (Prinsloo 2016) and suggests that students experience significant adversity in their families and communities. Clearly, things are not well with South African youth, as evidenced by the exceptionally high unemployment rates (OECD 2014).

Despite the tremendous challenges facing youth at university, the education system and educators themselves frequently engage with only the academic ‘face’ of their students. Cook-Sather and Curl (2014, 87) observe, “The current trend in districts across the United States involves a separation of the lives of students and teachers from teaching method instruction and an increased focus on standardization and evaluation within teacher education.” Such an approach has long been recognised in the workplace, where the worlds of work and of life are regarded as entirely separate (Andrews and Bailyn 1993). Such separations create order and structure, particularly for the worlds of work and education, making the job of employers, managers and educators much easier – they have to contend with only a sliver of their employees’ or students’ life experience.

But, such a schism has been widely recognised as fallacious. Kanter (2006, xii), in the context of work-life studies, refers to this as “the myth of separate worlds” and shows how, particularly in the wake of the feminist movement, the worlds of work and family have been recognised as being inextricably intertwined. In a similar way, Cook-Sather and Curl (2014) draw on ecological theory to show that the systems of education and family/community overlap and interact with each other. They show how the larger social context, beyond the borders of the educational institution, spills into and is reflected within the classroom. They conclude that good education involves being aware of and attending to the life world of students.

Notwithstanding the challenges university students face and the growing interest in the intersection between the classroom and community, relatively little research has been conducted into students’ psychosocial vulnerabilities and into the ways these vulnerabilities impact on other aspects of life, such as well-being and academic progress. This article aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by describing the psychosocial vulnerability of students at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in South Africa, giving particular attention to life challenges they experienced in their first year of study during the transition into academia, how these impacted on their studies at the time, and how these have impacted on their life satisfaction and academic progress over the next

year or two. It is hoped that such an account of students' lives will help educators better appreciate that their students are humans too and endeavour to weave such an appreciation into the classroom.

South African Research on Student Psychosocial Vulnerability

Psychosocial vulnerability refers to the kinds of life challenges or adversities faced by university students that are not directly part of their studies. These include experiences at home, in the community and at the university. Collins, Coffey, and Morris (2010) note that there is little research on the stresses experienced by social work students in the United Kingdom. This assertion appears to be equally true of university students in South Africa (Deen and Leonard 2015), where a search of the journal databases yielded little research on students' psychosocial vulnerability.

Many studies focus predominantly on the academic demands faced by students (Collins and Van Breda 2010) and on high failure and low throughput rates (Maree 2015). Du Plessis and Benecke (2011), for example, identified the academic challenges faced by 31 first-year students at UJ which resulted in them failing multiple modules. They explored the kinds of academic support (e.g., tutorials and writing development) available to students and concluded that despite these supports, many students lack drive and initiative.

Sommer and Dumont (2011) point out that academic competencies (such as reading with understanding, and critical writing) continue to predominate in studies of academic success, even though psychosocial factors have been shown to be significant predictors of academic success among disadvantaged students. They define psychosocial factors as including "academic motivation, self-esteem, perceived stress, academic overload and help-seeking" (386). Their research, among 101 first- and second-year students at the University of Fort Hare, found that intrinsic motivation, perceived stress and attitudes towards seeking help were associated with adjustment to university, and that adjustment and academic overload were associated with academic performance. While Sommer and Dumont (2011) define these constructs as 'psychosocial' factors, they remain strongly academic in their focus, rather than personal and social.

Thus while researchers may intend to study psychosocial vulnerability within the academic context, their research frequently focuses primarily on academics, with financial difficulties often being the only personal factor considered. This narrowing of the scope of psychosocial vulnerability to economics is not surprising, given the high prevalence of poverty in South Africa. Shumba and Naong (2013, 1025), for example, investigated "the impact of family income on students' career choices" among 141 students across three universities of technology. Two thirds of students cited financial matters as primary drivers of career choices and aspirations. This becomes increasingly prominent among poorer students. Alpaslan (2010) reports on qualitative research conducted with a

sample of 24 undergraduate students at Unisa. Financial difficulties, related to their living conditions in Sunnyside, were prominent among the challenges they reported. In addition, students also discussed challenges related to crime and violence, difficult living circumstances and difficulties in focusing on their studies. Another study, conducted among 1083 University of KwaZulu-Natal students (Munro et al. 2013, 168), found that 20.8% of students “experienced some level of vulnerability to food insecurity, with 16.1% reporting serious levels of vulnerability, and 4.7% experiencing severe to critical levels of vulnerability to food insecurity”. Students on financial aid and doing a bridging programme were more vulnerable than other students.

Many poor students come from rural communities, which brings additional challenges. Maxwell and Mudhovozi (2014) investigated the transitional challenges faced by nine students coming to the University of Venda from rural areas. These students often spent multiple years at home trying to gain access to university. Gaining entrance was often enabled by social capital – a family member or acquaintance at or associated with the university would assist the applicant through the institutional processes. Various factors, such as applying late, family pressures or lack of funds, result in students enrolling for a programme in which they are not interested. A similar study was conducted among 243 first-year rural students at an historically black university in KwaZulu-Natal (Pillay and Ngcobo 2010). Academic stressors were most prevalent (such as 93% reporting fear of failing and 76% indicating that the academic work was too demanding). Among the most prevalent personal life challenges were financial problems (86%), death of a family member (67%) and death of another significant person (63%).

Some of these last studies begin to attend to psychosocial vulnerability. Similarly, Mudhovozi (2011) studied the stress of 73 third-year students at one of the new universities and found that students reported adjustment to be the most stressful personal problem, followed by financial problems, and then personal illness and the death of a family member. Students also reported difficulties in relationships with the opposite gender, parents and their lecturer, and accommodation problems.

While psychosocial vulnerability is often thought of in relation to life at home, off-campus, in contrast to the academic vulnerability that is on-campus, some studies highlight on-campus psychosocial adversities. Gordon and Collins (2013), for example, investigated concerns around rape and sexual violence with 12 female students on a campus in KwaZulu-Natal. Their research revealed discourses centred on fear of immanent violation, taking responsibility to avoid the possibility of rape, and tensions between speaking out about sexual violence and keeping silent for fear of the repercussions. The pervasiveness of rape itself and the fear of rape among female students is captured in a quote from one participant, “We face rape. We face all things” (104).

Another study at UJ (Mbara and Celliers 2013), investigated the transport challenges of 1707 students (56% female), many of whom live off-campus and have to travel daily onto campus. This is an important topic, not only because of the transport challenges faced, but also because of other research (at the University of KwaZulu-Natal) which shows that living off campus significantly increases the likelihood of failing first year (Zewotir, North, and Murray 2011). UJ students reported spending an average of 38 minutes travelling each way between home and campus, and raised concerns about being late for or missing class, and experiencing violence while in transit.

While all of the studies cited so far give only marginal attention to psychosocial vulnerability, there are a handful that give focused attention to the personal challenges faced by students. McGowan and Kagee (2013) investigated the life-time exposure of 1337 students at a residential university to a range of traumatic life events. The vast majority (90%) reported experiencing at least one of the traumas, with exposure to the suicide or homicide of a close friend or family member being most frequent (43%). A fifth of the students indicated that the traumas occurred while they were a student. There was a significant positive relationship between the number of traumatic events and the level of posttraumatic stress symptoms. The study did not investigate the relationship between trauma and academic performance. The authors recommend educating students on the prevalence of trauma and its associated symptoms, and making counselling services more available to students.

Van Breda (2013) investigated the psychosocial vulnerability of 370 social work students at UJ. He found that the most prevalent life challenges experienced by students concerned death and poverty, which were reported by the majority of participants and which had significant negative impacts on personal and academic well-being. Other prevalent challenges included substance abuse by family members, HIV or Aids in the family and being mugged or assaulted. Van Breda also found a clustering of challenges related to violence in intimate and family relationships. Death of a loved one and experiencing physical abuse were both related to number of courses failed, as was a composite vulnerability score.

Methodology

This article reports on one facet of a larger mixed-methods study conducted among second- and third-year students at UJ in 2015. The larger study addressed both vulnerability and resilience of university students, and collected data using both quantitative scales and semi-structured interviews. The focus of this article is on just the quantitative vulnerability results, and their

relationship to two outcome variables: academic progress and life satisfaction. Therefore, the research design for this article is a quantitative cross-sectional survey.

The population was defined as all UJ second- and third-year undergraduate students registered during 2015 (N = 21 950). A nonprobability sampling strategy comprising both availability and purposive sampling was utilised to select a diverse sample of approximately 500 individuals from this population. The criteria for purposive sampling included that participants must have experienced some kind of challenge in the transition to university life. In total, 463 students participated in the study and completed usable questionnaires, representing 2.1% of the population.

The approximately 100 fourth-year UJ social work students served as field researchers, collecting the data as part of the requirement for their research course. They each interviewed five students from this population. Field workers were not permitted to interview their friends, but could refer their friends to a classmate for interviewing. Because most of the field workers were female, there was a risk of their over-sampling female students, therefore the field workers were required to sample at least two male and two female students, to ensure a reasonable gender balance.

The data collection tool was a self-administered questionnaire with four sections.

The first section comprised a set of **demographic questions** (age, gender, population group, home province/country and the faculty in which they were registered).

The second section comprised three questions used to calculate an **Academic Progress** outcome measure. The questions asked how many courses the student had failed, for how many courses the student had achieved a distinction, and a Likert scale rating of satisfaction with academic progress. Failing no courses scored 4, failing one course scored 3, two courses scored 2, three scored 1 and four or more failed courses scored 0. Obtaining a distinction for five or more courses scored 4, three or four courses scored 3, two scored 2, one scored 1, and no distinctions scored 0. Satisfaction with academic progress was scored from 0 (very dissatisfied) to 4 (very satisfied). These three scores were summated and converted to a 0-100 scale for ease of interpretation.

The third section comprised the **Satisfaction with Life Scale** (SLS) (Diener et al. 1985), a five-item scale rated on a seven-point Likert scale. The SLS had good measurement properties in the original validation: test-retest reliability of .82 and internal consistency of .87. The SLS has been widely used since then, including in South Africa, where studies have yielded similar levels of internal consistency ranging from .77 (Patel, Ramgoon, and Paruk 2009) to .84 (Roothman, Kirsten, and Wissing 2003). In this study, the SLS had an alpha coefficient of .78 with corrected item-total correlations ranging from .41 to .70, indicative of sufficient internal consistency for this study's purpose.

The fourth section was a **Vulnerability** self-report questionnaire that addresses life challenges during their first year at university. This is based on the questionnaire used in a previous study to measure the psychosocial vulnerability of UJ undergraduate social work students (Van Breda 2013). The scale comprises 20 life challenges that students might have experienced (see Table 1). They were asked whether or not they had experienced each challenge during their first year of study, and if so how much it impacted negatively on their studies in first year (not at all, a little bit, somewhat, a lot). These items were not summated into a scale score.

Participants completed the questionnaires on paper. Data was captured on SurveyMonkey by the field workers and imported into SPSS v23 for analysis. Statistical procedures included frequencies, descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation and the t-test. Significance was set at .05.

The study was approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee on 17 February 2015. Participants were provided with an information sheet, which explained that participation was voluntary and without incentive, that the data would be captured anonymously (only the field workers knew the names of the participants) and that they could withdraw at any time. Referral information for free counselling, both on-campus and off-campus, was provided in the letter. Participants signed a consent form, which was kept separate from the data to protect the anonymity of the data.

Results

Demographic Profile of Participants

A total of 463 second- and third-year UJ students participated in the study. More than half (57.7%) were female (similar to the population: 53.0%) and the overwhelming majority (93.3%) were African (higher than the population: 84.7%). The mean age of the sample was 21.8 years, with a range of 18-45 years, though the majority of participants (76.8%) were aged 20-23 years. The province in South Africa from which the largest percentage of students came was Gauteng (39.0%) – the province in which UJ is located. A further 21.2% come from Limpopo and 14.1% from Mpumalanga (the two provinces to the north and east of Gauteng) and another 12.8% from Kwa-Zulu Natal (yet further to the south east). Only 1.7% of participants came from outside of South Africa. The largest percentage of participants came from the Faculty of Humanities (32.0%), followed by Economic and Financial Sciences (19.0%) and Management (10.8%). As a percentage of the population, students from the Humanities were over-represented (4.47%), followed by Law (3.44%) and Education (3.06%), with the faculties of Health Sciences (0.59%) and Management (1.11%) being under-represented.

Life Challenges

Students were presented with a list of 20 life challenges and asked to indicate if they had experienced these challenges during their first year at university. A total of 1847 challenges were marked by the 463 participants, giving an average of four challenges per person. Table 1 lists the 20 challenges. The 'yes' column provides the frequencies and percentages of students who indicated that they had experienced each of the challenges. The table is sorted in descending order of frequency.

| Life Challenge | Yes | | Severity | |
|---|-----|-------|----------|------|
| | n | % | M | SD |
| I struggled to survive financially | 266 | 59.5% | 3.17 | 0.88 |
| Someone else I care about died | 255 | 55.4% | 2.95 | 0.95 |
| I experienced poverty | 221 | 47.8% | 2.99 | 0.92 |
| I was mugged/assaulted | 165 | 35.7% | 2.86 | 1.08 |
| Someone in my family abused alcohol or drugs | 148 | 32.2% | 2.49 | 1.03 |
| My parents separated or got divorced | 113 | 24.5% | 2.74 | 1.08 |
| Someone in my family was living with HIV | 105 | 22.7% | 2.37 | 1.17 |
| My parent(s) died | 96 | 20.8% | 3.22 | 1.08 |
| I was emotionally abused by my partner (boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse) | 91 | 19.7% | 2.87 | 0.99 |
| I was responsible to care for family members (parents or siblings) | 80 | 17.5% | 2.82 | 1.00 |
| I witnessed violence between my parents | 72 | 15.6% | 2.75 | 1.00 |
| I was involved in an accident (e.g. a car accident) | 68 | 14.7% | 2.41 | 1.03 |
| I witnessed someone attempting suicide | 49 | 10.7% | 2.59 | 1.09 |
| I was bullied at university | 34 | 7.4% | 2.91 | 1.00 |
| I was physically abused by my partner | 21 | 4.5% | 2.78 | 1.22 |
| My child died | 18 | 3.9% | 2.87 | 1.19 |
| I was sexually assaulted or raped (include attempted rape) | 13 | 2.8% | 2.67 | 1.37 |
| I had an abortion | 13 | 2.8% | 3.25 | 1.14 |
| I was living with HIV | 11 | 2.4% | 3.00 | 0.76 |

| | | | | |
|---------------------|---|------|------|------|
| I miscarried a baby | 8 | 1.7% | 2.71 | 1.11 |
|---------------------|---|------|------|------|

Financial adversity featured as a predominant form of adversity for participating students, occupying first (59.5% said ‘I struggled to survive financially’), third (47.8% said ‘I experienced poverty’) and tenth (17.5% said ‘I was responsible to care for family members’) places. Two thirds (69.8%) of participants indicated that they had experienced one or more of these aspects of financial adversity during their first year, with 34.1% experiencing two and 9.3% experiencing all three.

Loss also featured as a prevalent adversity. More than half (55.4%) the students reported that during their first year at university someone they cared about (other than a parent) had died and 20.8% that a parent had died. In total, 60.0% of the participants reported experiencing one or both of these losses during their first year, and 15.8% reported experiencing both.

Exposure to **violence** was reported by a substantial number of participants. A little over a third (35.7%) of participants reported having been mugged or assaulted during their first year at the university, while less than a tenth (7.8%) reported being bullied at university and 2.8% reported being sexually assaulted or raped. More than a third (39.7%) reported one or more of these experiences of violence, with 5.2% reporting two and 0.4% (representing two individuals) reporting all three.

Family problems during their first year at university were among the more prominent adversities reported by participants. A third (32.2%) reported that someone in their family abused alcohol or drugs, 24.5% reported that their parents separated or got divorced and 22.7% reported that someone in their family was living with HIV. A little over half (53.1%) the participants reported one or more of these three family problems, with 15.1% reporting two and 5.4% reporting all three.

In addition, a number of participants reported experiences of **domestic violence**. One fifth (19.7%) reported being emotionally abused by their partner during their first year at university. Fifteen percent (15.6%) witnessed violence between their parents. And 4.5% reported being physically abused by their partners. A third (29.8%) reporting experiencing at least one of these three forms of family violence, with 6.9% reporting two and 1.5% all three.

A number of **other life challenges** were also reported by participants, though in smaller numbers. Most prominently among these events, 14.7% reported being involved in an accident, 10.7% reported witnessing a suicide attempt, and 2.4% reported living with HIV. In addition, a number of participants reported various challenges related to their children: 3.9% reported that their child had died, 2.8% reported having an abortion, and 1.7% reported miscarrying a baby. In total, 7.1% reported one or more of these last three child-related challenges.

Table 1 also presents the extent to which participants felt each life challenge negatively affected their studies while they were in first year, which is referred to as ‘severity’. This is important because a life event may be experienced differently by different people. For this reason, some authors refer to these events as ‘*potentially* traumatic life events’ (Galatzer-Levy, Burton, and Bonanno 2012, 542, emphasis added), because a negative life event is not necessarily ‘traumatic’. It is striking that some prevalent life challenges had low severity for participants, while some low prevalence challenges had a high severity. For example, having an abortion, which is the third least prevalent adversity, had the highest severity for those participants who had experienced it. Conversely, a family member abusing alcohol or drugs was the fifth most prevalent adversity, but had the third lowest severity. Clearly, different life challenges have different degrees of severity for participants, and a commonly experienced life challenge does not necessarily warrant significant attention, while an infrequently occurring adversity may require significant attention. The life challenges with the highest severity scores were: having an abortion, the death of a parent, struggling financially, living with HIV, experiencing poverty and the death of a significant other. It is noteworthy that death and poverty, which are the most prevalent life challenges, are also among the most severe.

Impact of Life Challenges on Later Outcomes

Adversity and vulnerability are typically regarded as negative, not only because of the ways in which they cause harm to people at the time (such as by negatively affecting students’ studies at the time), but also because they can have longer-term negative impacts on well-being and social functioning. Two outcomes were measured in this study: academic progress over the past two or three years of the students’ studying and satisfaction with life at the time of data collection.

| Life Challenge | Academic Progress | | | Satisfaction with Life | | |
|--|-------------------|-----|-------|------------------------|-----|-------|
| | t | df | p | t | df | p |
| I struggled to survive financially | -2.19 | 438 | .029* | -6.04 | 460 | .000* |
| Someone else I care about died | 1.42 | 438 | .158 | -1.73 | 460 | .084 |
| I experienced poverty | -3.39 | 438 | .001* | -4.75 | 460 | .000* |
| I was mugged/assaulted | -1.15 | 438 | .250 | -3.74 | 460 | .000* |
| Someone in my family abused alcohol or drugs | -0.41 | 438 | .682 | -1.44 | 460 | .150 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-----|-------|-------|-----|-------|
| My parents separated or got divorced | -3.23 | 438 | .001* | -3.69 | 176 | .000* |
| Someone in my family was living with HIV | -1.20 | 438 | .230 | -1.48 | 460 | .139 |
| My parent(s) died | 0.23 | 438 | .816 | -0.55 | 460 | .583 |
| I was emotionally abused by my partner (boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse) | -2.90 | 438 | .004* | -2.33 | 460 | .020* |
| I was responsible to care for family members (parents or siblings) | -0.96 | 438 | .338 | -4.53 | 460 | .000* |
| I witnessed violence between my parents | -2.45 | 438 | .015* | -3.28 | 92 | .001* |
| I was involved in an accident (e.g. a car accident) | -0.98 | 438 | .327 | -0.80 | 460 | .423 |
| I witnessed someone attempting suicide | -2.19 | 438 | .029* | -2.81 | 460 | .005* |
| I was bullied at university | -1.98 | 438 | .049* | -2.15 | 36 | .038* |
| I was physically abused by my partner | -3.72 | 438 | .000* | -2.49 | 460 | .013* |
| My child died | -2.00 | 438 | .046* | -1.69 | 460 | .091* |
| I was sexually assaulted or raped (include attempted rape) | -1.22 | 438 | .224 | -1.37 | 12 | .196 |
| I had an abortion | -3.18 | 438 | .002* | -0.93 | 460 | .508 |
| I was living with HIV | -2.02 | 438 | .044* | -2.24 | 460 | .026* |
| I miscarried a baby | 0.01 | 438 | .990 | -1.09 | 460 | .277 |

* p significant at $< .05$

Table 2 provides the results of a series of t-tests to compare the differences in academic progress and satisfaction with life outcomes between those who did and did not report having experienced each of the life challenges in first year. It can be seen that in nine of the life challenges there were statistically significant differences for both outcome variables. In all of these cases, the outcome scores were lower for those who had experienced that challenge than for those who had not. These are: experiencing poverty, being emotionally or physically abused by their partner, being bullied at university, witnessing violence between their parents, parental separation, witnessing a suicide attempt, living with HIV and struggling to survive financially.

There were two challenges that impacted significantly on academic progress, but not on life satisfaction, viz. terminating a pregnancy and losing a child. Conversely, there were two challenges that impacted significantly on life satisfaction, but not academic progress, viz. being mugged/assaulted and being responsible to care for one's family.

Finally, there were seven life challenges that had no significant impact on either outcome variable. In four of these, the outcome scores were lower for those who had experienced the

challenge than for those who had not, but the difference was not significant: being sexually assaulted or raped, having a family member abusing alcohol or drugs, having a family member living with HIV and being involved in an accident. In the other three cases, however, the academic progress scores were slightly *higher* among those who had experienced the adversity, while the satisfaction with life scores were slightly lower – though neither differences were statistically significant: the death of a parent or another loved one, and losing a baby. Despite the lack of statistical significance, the convergence here of three types of significant loss is striking, and suggests that the death of a loved one may in fact have marked impact on individuals, either positive or negative, which in combination cancel each other out.

Pileup of Adversity

The previous sections considered each of the 20 life challenges in isolation. However, studies have shown that the accumulation or pileup of multiple adversities is pivotal to predicting stress impacts (Benson and Saito 2000). Therefore, for each participant the total number of challenges they reported experiencing in their first year of study at university was calculated. Pileup scores ranged from 0 to 14 out of 20, with the largest group of participants (20.5%) reporting three challenges, and with the majority of participants (72.4%) reporting from one to five challenges. The mean pileup score was 4.0.

To determine if the pileup of life challenges in first year predicted academic progress and satisfaction with life a year or two later, these variables were correlated using Pearson's r . Pileup correlated significantly and negatively with both academic progress ($r = -.197, p < .001$) and satisfaction with life ($r = -.331, p < .001$). The stronger correlation of pileup with life satisfaction than with academic progress may lend further support to the possibility that there is a somewhat more consistently negative impact of pileup on well-being, while a more complex and perhaps contradictory or curvilinear relationship with academic progress, namely that adversity may steel some students to work harder to succeed, while for others adversity may impair their ability to focus on their studies.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that suggest caution in interpreting the results. The sample, while large and diverse, was not randomly drawn from the population and thus is not necessarily representative of the population. The sample was also drawn from just one university, and may therefore not reflect the experiences of all South African university students. The sampling criterion that participants had to have experienced some kind of challenge in the transition to

university may have resulted in a sample that is more vulnerable than the population. However, this is perhaps ameliorated by the fact that many participants cited academic rather than personal challenges as the reason why they met the sampling criterion and that 20 participants reported that they did not experience any of the 20 life challenges listed. And the participants were asked to recall challenges experienced a year or two previously, possibly eliciting memory errors.

Discussion

The data presented here provide further evidence of the substantial experience of life challenges by university students, as has been found in international studies (Galatzer-Levy, Burton, and Bonanno 2012). These life challenges are not just in their overall life span, as found by other authors (Van Breda 2013, McGowan and Kagee 2013), but specifically during their first year of study. These are not, however, challenges directly related to the students' studies – they are located in the students' private lives among family and community. Nevertheless, they clearly do impact academic progress, with 11 of the 20 challenges significantly decreasing students' academic performance, confirming the ecological view of university and life being interacting systems and making these private challenges of relevance to educators (Cook-Sather and Curl 2014).

Financial adversity and loss appear here as prominent life challenges, as has been found in a number of previous studies (Maxwell and Mudhovozi 2014, Mudhovozi 2011, Van Breda 2013, Pillay and Ngcobo 2010). Financial challenges are, it seems, ubiquitous, and no doubt related to the very high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality that continue to beleaguer South Africa (Seekings and Natrass 2015), despite the promises of the political transformation from 1994. These massive social forces that burden the majority of South Africans, and particularly South African children and youth (Hall and Sambu 2014), have a ripple effect on all facets of society, including higher education. As a result, students are faced with the challenges of their own hunger and insecure accommodation, while also being concerned for and frequently taking care of family members back home. All of this impacts negatively on the ability of students to invest in their studies, making them academically vulnerable.

The experiences of loss are much less obvious and tangible than poverty, and thus harder to recognise and engage within the university system, though they have been reported in previous studies (Van Breda 2013, Pillay and Ngcobo 2010). The death of loved ones, including parents, during the first year of study, are among the most prevalent challenges students have to face. Curiously, however, there appears to be little relationship between these experiences of loss and academic progress and life satisfaction. It is possible that here, as in some other results, we are seeing the divergent ways individuals process traumatic experiences. Some succumb to the negative

impact of trauma, while others find ways to turn these experiences into opportunities for growth and, in the context of their education, into fuel to strive even harder to succeed. Such differences speak to the crux of resilience theory, which essentially seeks to explain why some people who are exposed to adversity do well while others break down (Southwick et al. 2014). This is in line with studies that find a curvilinear relationship between posttraumatic stress and growth (Kleim and Ehlers 2009).

Conclusions & Recommendations

This study surveyed the prevalence and impact of a range of psychosocial life challenges experienced during the first year of study by a group of UJ students who were now in their second or third year. The results point towards high levels of psychosocial adversity in first year, much of which has a negative impact on both academic progress and personal life satisfaction a year or two later. Two focus areas that emerge are poverty and loss (death), which appear as prevalent and impactful, both at the time they occur and a year or two in relation to academic progress and life satisfaction (in the case of poverty). Other significant challenges relate to violence, notably being mugged/assaulted, intimate partner emotional abuse and being bullied at university (which was low prevalence but high severity at the time and impacted negatively on both academic progress and life satisfaction). In addition, family concerns such as family substance abuse, parental divorce or a family member living with HIV emerged as prevalent challenges. Having an abortion or living with HIV were low prevalence but had high severity at the time and impacted negatively on academic progress.

While poverty is a student challenge that is quite public and visible, and which has received much attention from universities in the form of financial relief and feeding schemes, the other areas of adversity are much less visible (perhaps because they are located outside the university context or because they are particularly private) and thus have arguably enjoyed much less attention. It is, for example, noteworthy that UJ has a whole department, with full-time staff, dedicated to HIV (<http://www.uj.ac.za/corporateservices/hiv-aids-office>), which has a low prevalence among university students, but no programme to address intimate partner violence, which emerges here as prevalent and destructive.

It appears that institutions of higher learning might need to expand their vision of their role to not merely educate students, but to develop the whole person of the student. Students are, after all, humans too. Cultivating scientists, critical thinkers and practitioners involves much more than providing just an intellectual education. It involves growing well-rounded, well-functioning, whole human beings who are able to take their place in society and contribute to the development of the

world. This may be severely hampered when students are experiencing high levels of adversity that impact negatively on well-being and academic progress.

It is recommended that universities adopt a two-pronged approach to engaging with and developing the whole student. First, student health and counselling departments, whose mandate is to work with the personal lives of students, should engage more proactively in addressing the psychosocial life challenges that have emerged in this and other studies. While reactive, therapeutic services are important. They need to be based on a community development foundation that aims to cultivate a university community that does not tolerate violence and abuse, and that facilitates mutual care and helping. Community education on topics of loss, patriarchy, violence and posttraumatic stress, will assist in providing a more rounded education to students that also equips them to take care of themselves and each other. In addition, such services should drive a policy development process to foster safety for students on and around university campuses and residences.

Second, university educators should expand their teaching focus to target not only the students' understanding of the subject matter, but also the development of the whole person. Learning should be located in the real world in which students live and engage with the life challenges that students experience when outside the classroom. This is perhaps easier in the humanities and social sciences, where the topics of education are nicely located in society. Thus, for example, when teaching on feminist theory, a lecturer can help students apply this learning to their own life experiences of patriarchy and gender-based violence. But even in the natural sciences, educators can find ways to make similar links. For example, when teaching the ecological perspective in biology, a lecturer can help students also think about their social ecologies and the reciprocal influences between them, their networks of relationships and their environment.

Tutors, who are typically focused on first-year students, could play an important mediating role between these two prongs, by serving as frontline triage workers with students. Tutors are students themselves, often of a similar age to first-year students, and meet with students in smaller groups than lecturers. Within this more intimate space, there is greater opportunity to engage with the person of the student. Tutors may thus be in a position to create opportunities for students to disclose their life challenges and to refer them to the professional services. In addition, tutors are well-placed to make links between the material taught in class and the students' own life worlds, thereby humanising and personalising the lecture material.

Given the extent of vulnerability among university students, universities have a responsibility to care for students, which means an expansion of their role to incorporate the student as person. Arguably, good education is about educating the whole person. In so doing, universities

could reduce the extent of students' exposure to adversity during their studies, build in supportive responses for when students do experience life challenges, integrate such challenges into the students' education, and contribute to the holistic development of students.

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