

**AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED MEANINGS WITHIN A
COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS IN CHANGING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL
CONTEXTS**

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**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree Magister Artium in Research Psychology as the North-West
University (Potchefstroom Campus)**

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SUMMARY

AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED MEANINGS WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS IN CHANGING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Keywords: Socially constructed meanings, community, social contexts,
African worldview

This article explores some of the social processes and functions within a community of learners who had to adjust to changing social and academic contexts. The group included 13 learners from Botswana, five of whom were males and eight of whom were females, with an age range of between 25 and 45 years. The learners were primarily Tswana-speaking, with the exception of one who spoke Afrikaans. The learners were registered for an informal one-year counselling certificate course at the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus. The Botswana learners had no prior contact with mainly white, Afrikaans-speaking communities, such as those found in Potchefstroom. As a result, they had to make various adjustments on personal, academic and social levels. An inductive qualitative approach was followed, using the MmogoTM-method as a case study, to gain insight into the experiences of a group of learners. The MmogoTM-method facilitated the use of culturally appropriate items and the learners were able to use cultural symbols to reflect on their experiences. The learners were asked to make visual presentations of their experiences throughout the time spent in their new contexts. Thereafter focus group discussions were conducted, where the visual presentations were discussed.

The central themes were derived from the focus group data and the analysis of the visual presentations. The findings indicate that the process of creating new social meanings occurred through various phases. The initial phases were marked by uncertainty and misconceptions. The early interactions among the community of learners led them to realise that they generally shared the same goals, and also had other things in common, such as

political and religious beliefs. The development of a collective consciousness was characterised by the emergence of smaller groups within the large community. As time went by, the collective consciousness in the community deepened and the smaller groups became more diffused. This contributed to open sharing of information and knowledge creation; and it facilitated the attainment of goals.

The findings also indicate that there were a number of processes involved in the construction of meanings that contributed to the negotiation of meaning, and an exchange of ideas and information within the community of learners. The communication patterns within the community of learners were found to be open, honest and inclusive. This contributed to the free flow of information and facilitated minimisation of misconceptions. In addition, these patterns facilitated decision-making and encouraged feelings of belonging within the community. Natural leadership emerged and the responsibilities associated with it were discharged in specific and African-conscious ways. The learners also used context-specific analogies to illustrate relational support within their community. For example, they compared relational support to oxen pulling a plough and to a traditional three-legged pot to express the extent to which they mutually depended on each other's talents and resources.

The findings also point to certain underlying assumptions that contributed to the development of relational support. In this community, a collective consciousness and sense of trust emerged as the learners worked together towards their goals. The values of sharing and working together are also the defining features of the African worldview.

OPSOMMING

'N ONDERSOEK NA SOSIAAL GEKONSTRUEERDE BETEKENISSE IN 'N GEMEENSKAP LEERDERS IN VERANDERENDE AKADEMIESE EN SOSIALE KONTEKSTE

Sleutelwoorde: Sosiaal gekonstrueerde betekenis, gemeenskap,
sosiale kontekste, Afrika-wêreldbeskouing

Hierdie artikel ondersoek sommige sosiale prosesse en funksies binne 'n gemeenskap leerders wat moes aanpas by nuwe sosiale en akademiese kontekste. Die groep het 13 leerders van Botswana ingesluit, waarvan vyf mans en agt vrouens was, met ouderdomme wat gewissel het tussen 25 en 45 jaar. Die leerders het hoofsaaklik Tswana gepraat, met die uitsondering van een wat Afrikaans gepraat het. Die leerders was geregistreer vir 'n informele, eenjaar-beradingsertifikaat aan die Noordwes-Universiteit se Potchefstroomkampus. Die Botswana-leerders het geen vorige kontak gehad met 'n hoofsaaklik wit Afrikaansprekende gemeenskap soos wat in Potchefstroom aangetref word nie. Gevolglik moes hulle verskeie aanpassings op persoonlike, akademiese en sosiale vlakke maak. 'n Induktiewe kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering is gevolg, waar die MmogoTM-metode as gevallestudie gebruik is om insig te verkry in die leerders se ervarings. Die MmogoTM-metode behels onder andere dat kultureel gepaste items gebruik word om leerders in staat te stel om kulturele simbole te gebruik om oor hul ervarings te reflekteer. Die leerders is gevra om visuele voorstellings te maak van hulle ervarings tydens die tydperk wat hulle in die nuwe kontekste deurgebring het. Daarna is fokusgroepgesprekke gehou waar die visuele voorstellings bespreek is.

Die sentrale temas is afgelei uit die fokusgroepdata en die ontledings van die visuele voorstellings. Die bevindings dui aan dat die proses van sosiale betekenisgewing in hierdie konteks deur verskeie fases plaasgevind het. Die aanvanklike fases is gekenmerk deur onsekerhede en wanopvattinge. Die aanvanklike interaksies in die gemeenskap leerders het gelei tot die gewaarwording dat hulle grootliks dieselfde doelwitte in gemeen het, sowel as ander sake, soos politieke en godsdienstige oortuigings. Die ontwikkeling van

'n kollektiewe bewustheid is gekenmerk deur die ontstaan van kleiner groepe binne die groter gemeenskap. Mettertyd het 'n kollektiewe bewustheid in die gemeenskap verdiep namate die kleiner groep se bedoelings duidelik geword het. Sodoende kon die leerders inligting deel, kennis genereer en nader aan hulle doelwitte beweeg.

Die bevinding dui ook aan dat 'n aantal prosesse betrokke was by die sosiale konstruksie van betekenis wat bygedra het tot die onderhandeling van betekenis, sowel as die uitruil van idees en inligting binne die gemeenskap leerders. Die kommunikasiepatrone in die gemeenskap van leerders was oop, eerlik en inklusief, en dit het bygedra tot die vrye vloei van inligting, die minimalisering van wanopvattinge en besluitneming. Gevoelens van behoort aan die gemeenskap is ook hierdeur gefasiliteer. Die natuurlike leierskap wat na vore getree het en die verantwoordelikheid wat met die posisie geassosieer is, is gekenmerk deur 'n Afrika-bewussyn. Die leerders het kontekstspesifieke analogieë gebruik om verhoudingsondersteuning in hulle gemeenskap te illustreer. Hulle het dit byvoorbeeld vergelyk met osse wat 'n ploeg trek en met 'n tradisionele driepootpot, om te illustreer tot watter mate hulle op mekaar se talent en hulpbronne aangewese was.

Die bevinding het ook aangedui dat daar sekere onderliggende aannames is wat bygedra het tot die ontwikkeling van verhoudingsondersteuning. 'n Kollektiewe bewustheid en 'n sin van vertrouwe binne hierdie gemeenskap het na vore getree namate die leerders saamgewerk het om hulle doelwitte te bereik. Die waardes van samewerking en om te deel is van die onderskeidende eienskappe van 'n Afrika-wêreldbeskouing.

PREFACE

The candidate chose to propose an article, with the support of his supervisor.

Prof V Roos

**PERMISSION TO SUBMIT THIS ARTICLE FOR EXAMINATION
PURPOSES**

I, the supervisor, hereby declare that the input and the effort of MK Maine in writing this article reflect research done by him on this topic. I hereby grant permission that he may submit this article for examination purposes in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister Artium in Research Psychology.

Signed on this day.....at the North-West University

.....

Prof V Roos
Supervisor

INTENDED JOURNAL AND GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

This dissertation will be submitted to the *Journal of Psychology in Africa* to be considered for publication. The following is a copy of the guidelines for prospective authors set out by the journal.

Guidelines to Authors

The *Journal of Psychology in Africa* includes original articles, review articles, book reviews, commentaries, special issues, case analyses, reports, special announcements, et cetera. Contributions should attempt a synthesis of emic and etic methodologies and applications. Specifically, manuscripts should:

- 1) Combine quantitative and qualitative data.
- 2) Take a systematic qualitative or ethnographic approach.
- 3) Use an original and creative methodological approach.
- 4) Address an important but overlooked topic.
- 5) Present new theoretical or conceptual ideas.

Furthermore, all papers must show an awareness of the cultural context of the research questions asked, the measures used, and the results obtained. Finally the papers should be practical, based on local experience, and applicable to crucial development efforts in key areas of psychology.

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Manuscripts

Manuscripts should be submitted in English, French, Portuguese or Spanish. They should be typewritten and double-spaced, with wide margins, using one side of the page only. Manuscripts should be submitted to the Editor-in-Chief *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, Professor Elias Mpofu, Department of Counselor Education, Counseling Psychology and Rehabilitation Services, Pennsylvania State University, 327 CEDAR Building, University Park, PA 16802-3110, USA, e-mail: exm31@psu.edu. Authors are encouraged to submit manuscripts via e-mail, in MS Word. However, two hard copies are required for any e-mail submission.

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SUMMARY

This article explores some of the social processes and functions of people in the construction of social meanings that emerged within a community of learners who had to adjust to new social and academic contexts. An inductive qualitative research approach was followed. The MmogoTM-method as a case study, and focus group discussions were used to gain insight into the experiences of the learners in their new social and academic contexts. The MmogoTM-method involves the use of clay, sticks and beads as culturally familiar items to create visual representations. The learners were asked to make visual representations of their development while engaging in their new social and academic contexts. Thereafter focus group discussions were conducted to discuss their presentations. The findings suggest that meanings developed over a period of time, and ranged from misperceptions about the group to an experience of a cohesive group with mutual goals, which consisted of different subgroups that offered social support and opportunities to collaborate and share resources. Processes that facilitated socially created meanings include the enabling of group interactions, democratic leadership, and open and transparent communication patterns. Specific beliefs supported the community's functioning, such as collective consciousness, trust and sharing of resources. The findings contribute to the better understanding of the contextual groundedness of socially constructed meanings in a community's functioning in new contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The meaning-making processes in social contexts inform community processes and interactions and can contribute to or limit the adaptation of people in various unpredictable ways. Through exploring some of the processes and functions of people in social meaning-making processes in changing contexts, from an African perspective, it could be possible to facilitate enabling community contexts. Most descriptions of meaning-making processes are based on Westernised and individualistic perspectives, which are not necessarily applicable in an African context. Mkhize (2004) and Mbiti (1969), however, warn that this does not imply that all African people share a unifying African worldview with specific dogmas that people have to accept. Although similarities exist, there remains a great deal of diversity in terms of the cultures, languages and beliefs that define African people. The aim of this research is to make a contribution to the understanding of the philosophies and worldviews of indigenous people in Africa who are making sense of the changes in their lives and the world.

This research is based on the socio-ecological theory that suggests a dynamic interplay between people and their social contexts. Human behaviour is integrated in a dynamic and complex network of intrapersonal issues, interpersonal and community dynamics, institutional persuasions, and public policy (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2007; Sword, 1999). This implies that human beings and their communities exert reciprocal influences over each other (Haughton, 2006; Keesing & Strathern, 1997; Larkin, 2004; Sword, 1999), thus contributing to a sense of interdependence between individuals and the contexts in which they function. This interdependence is further realised in an African worldview. The interplay between the socio-political,

economic and spiritual levels of being becomes part of the homeostasis of a bigger universe (Bamford, 2007; Mkhize, 2004; Venter, 2003; Keesing & Strathern, 1997). It is within this interdependency between individuals and their contexts that meanings are created and maintained (Charon, 2001, Strauss, 2005).

Socially, sense-making provides the parameters for human interactions in the social context in which they occur. They influence behaviour in communities where such meanings are constructed and applied (Hagler, Norman, Zabinski, Sallis, Calfas & Patrick, 2007; Klunklin & Greenwood, 2006). Individual behaviour can either reinforce or discredit socially created meanings that define a community context (Haughton, 2006; Henslin, 1999; Hovell, Hillman, Blumberg, Sipan, Atkins, Hofstetter & Myers, 1994; Keesing & Strathern, 1997; Larkin 2004; Sword, 1999). Individual behaviour that affirms a community's socially constructed meanings is seen as enabling within the social context where such conduct occurs and is defined (Lynch & McConath, 2006). This is because it facilitates the development of a collective consciousness, a sense of belonging and self-worth in the community setting (Henslin, 1999; Larkin, 2004; Lynch & McConatha, 2006). This could be true for people who subscribe to the African worldview in which these elements are essential conditions for human existence (Venter, 2003). An affirmation of the co-constructed meanings in a community contributes positively to an individual's social standing, thus earning the person respect and positive regard in the community (Mpofu, 2001). Equally, the community does not support individual behaviour that discredits communally constructed meanings.

Communal meanings contribute to the co-construction of a community context that enables members to engage in self-directed behaviour aimed at achieving their goals and benefiting their community (Heuser, 2005). It creates an atmosphere in which relationships of trust may develop and it encourages group cohesion and unconditional support. Within such community contexts, members can work together and share resources while pursuing their collective ambitions.

The aim of this study was to explore some of the processes and functions that emerged within a community of learners from an African context during a period where they were adjusting to changes in their social and academic contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research process was qualitative in nature and followed an inductive approach (Creswell, 2005; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). This approach allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and the meanings that emerged within the new social context. The inductive nature of qualitative research provided an opportunity to explore the participants' contextually embedded experiences (Klunklin & Greenwood, 2006; Oka & Shaw, 2000). An inductive approach furthermore implies that the researcher explores themes that emerge from the research without preconceived hypotheses (Henning et al., 2004).

Research design: Mmogo™—method case study

In qualitative research the self, life experiences and the symbolic representations thereof are culturally and contextually embedded (Terre

Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). This means that participants' symbolic representations will be manifested in a manner that reflects images of their culturally embedded experiences. In indigenous societies such as those in Africa, the self is culturally and contextually embedded, and human beings are for instance culturally defined in terms of their social belonging in a group context (Mkhize, 2004). However, contemporary methods of gathering data, which are based on Western assumptions and theories, may overlook the influence of this cultural and contextual embeddedness on the conception of meaning and its symbolic representation in African communities (Roos & Klopper, 2008). It was therefore decided to use the Mmogo™ method to explore the participants' socially created meanings.

The Mmogo™-method is based on symbolic interactionism, social constructionism and community psychology. Symbolic interactionism is rooted in social psychology and is concerned with the emerging symbols and understandings that give meaning to people's interactions (Henning *et al.*, 2004). It involves the visual symbolic projection of socially created meanings, and provides a research context in which the participants' experiences may be explored in a social research context. Furthermore, the symbols that emerged from the visual presentations were founded on historical and cultural contexts, thus enabling the researcher to gain insight into the socio-cultural contexts in which meanings are created and maintained (Roos & Klopper, 2008). Meanings emerged from the participants' experiences of their interactions with and reflections on the social structure, facilitating adaptation to new academic and social contexts, and informing new interactions and behaviour. Therefore, these meanings informed the continuous reciprocal processes and interdependence of interactions between people and the

environments in which they function, as understood by the socio-ecological theory (Visser, 2007).

Research context

This research is contextualised against the background of the restructuring and merging of institutions of higher learning to contribute to greater cooperation, sharing of resources and expertise between institutions of higher learning. These processes culminated in the merging of University of the North West with three other campuses. The learners who participated in the research had to join another campus and had to relocate from a mainly rural, Tswana-speaking environment to a semi-urban, mostly Afrikaans-speaking context. This meant that the learners had to make various changes to their social and academic contexts.

This was not the only change for the learners, as the majority of the learners were from Botswana, a neighbouring country of South Africa. Botswana is a mainly rural country where resources are limited and people depend largely on subsistent farming for survival. In response to their realities, the various African countries in the African subcontinent formed the Southern African Development Community (SADC). An agreement was reached to pursue a greater degree of cooperation and sharing of resources, such as education. The group of students were therefore also compelled to adjust to a new, cultural milieu.

Participants

The research group consisted of 13 learners, five of whom were males and eight of whom were females, with an age range of between 25 and 45 years. The participants were all Tswana-speaking, except for one participant who

was Afrikaans-speaking. The majority of the participants (11) came from different parts of the mainly rural Botswana. All participants planned to return to Botswana to apply their skills and knowledge in their own community. The learners had no prior contact with the mainly white, Afrikaans socio-cultural context that they encountered in Potchefstroom and they had to make various adjustments on personal, academic and social levels. For example, when they looked for accommodation, some of the learners were refused lodging once the owners discovered that they were black. Learners also indicated that whereas they did not have regular contact with lecturers before, at the new academic institution they were expected to attend all classes and to be in class on time.

Procedure

During the course of the year, various individual and group discussions were conducted with the group of learners as part of the training and supervision process. The discussions were aimed at exploring their experiences of adjusting to the new contexts, but provided little insight into the processes and functions that were present in this community of learners. The learners were subsequently invited to participate in the MmogoTM-method where they could present their experiences visually. Focus group discussions were conducted after completion of the visual presentations and the participants could then explain what was portrayed in it. Ethical permission was obtained for the research.

Data collection

The Mmogo™ method provided participants with the opportunity to not only reflect on their interactions with the current social context, but also to use symbols from other contexts to communicate their experiences (Roos & Klopper, 2008). Clay, straws, beads and needles were used to project interactions in the community and their social contexts (Roos & Klopper, 2008). The Mmogo™-method is based on the notion that experiences are culturally embedded and represented by images that reflect the meanings of a community in context-specific ways (Benzies & Allen, 2001). The participants were asked to use culturally familiar items to make visual presentations of their development since the beginning of the year. An example of the culturally familiar items that were used is shown in the photo below.



Photo 1: Appropriate cultural items used for the Mmogo™-method

Focus group discussions were conducted to allow the participants to share the meanings of their visual presentations. According to Kroeger (1994), the informal nature of focus group discussions reduces psychological

barriers and improves candour among the participants. The safe environment that focus groups provide encourages the sharing of experiences and enables full and comprehensive interactions in the community context (Kroeger, 1994; Madriz, 2000). Focus group discussions thus allowed the participants to express the underlying meanings of their representations. Additionally, the groups made it possible to observe these collective human interactions as a context in which meanings emerged (Madriz, 2000; Roos & Klopper, 2008). The collaborative nature of focus groups in research focuses on the multivocality of the human experience. The ensuing interactions in a focus group place people in a situation similar to real life, in which meanings emerge and are maintained (Keesing & Strathern, 1997; Kroeger, 1994; Madriz, 2000).

Data analysis

Data were analysed on different levels. The visual data from the Mmogo™-method were analysed according to the recommendations of Roos and Klopper (2008):

The visual data were analysed according to the following steps:

- Step 1: Ask participants about each object that they made to determine the explicit meanings of the object.
- Step 2: Determine the relationships between the different objects in the visual presentation.
- Step 3: Apply the visual presentation to the specific question that was asked to provide insight into the phenomenon being studied.
- Step 4: Explore the cultural meanings that are manifested in the symbolic use of the objects.

The textual data were transcribed verbatim and analysed by means of content analysis. Data were organised according to themes and sub-themes (Henning et al., 2004).

Verification and trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1995) suggested criteria for assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research, which were applied in this research: confirmability, credibility transferability and dependability. Confirmability in qualitative research is achieved by triangulating data collection methods and theories (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002; Madriz, 2000; Roos & Klopper, 2008; Stake, 2000). In this study the MmogoTM-method and focus group discussions were used as data collection methods. Creswell (2004) points out that using different methods to collect data contributes to the trustworthiness of the study. This study employed socio-ecological theory and symbolic interactionism as well meta-theoretical perspectives in community psychology to interpret the data and discuss the findings. According to Johnson (1997), this improves the validity and trustworthiness of the study. In addition, the researcher's familiarity with the African culture and his insight into cultural symbols added value to the data collection and analysis process, thus contributing to the trustworthiness and confirmability of the findings (Evans & Broido, 1999; Shenton, 2004).

According to Evans and Broido (1999), credibility is partly ensured by a clear description of the procedures involved in conducting the study, analysing the data, and drawing conclusions. Lincoln and Guba (1995) view transferability as the extent to which the study and its findings are applicable to different situations. This is demonstrated by the use of thick and rich

descriptions to create a sculpture of the socially constructed meanings (Henning et al., 2004). In this study, the contextual description of the community of participants is described in detail. Furthermore, direct quotations and photographs of the visual representations are provided to support the conclusions that were drawn. The events and the stories reported in the findings are thickened by the contextual descriptions.

Ethical considerations

This study is part of a project entitled “An exploration of enabling contexts”, for which ethical permission was granted by the Ethical Committee of the North-West University (# 05K14). The participants were informed about the research project, the purpose of conducting the project and what the end product would be. Thereafter, informed consent was obtained from the participants, and they were informed that they could withdraw at any point. Confidentiality of the source material was maintained (Henning et al., 2004; SA Health Info, 1999).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The following visual presentation provides an example of how the data were managed.



Photo 2: An example of the management of visual data

Step 1: Identification of objects with explicit meanings

The kraal represents the learners as a community. Upright straws represent the individual learners, and the ones on the ground represent the obstacles that the learners encountered. The black and white beads on the ground represent the prior knowledge of the learners while the coloured beads are the knowledge that emerged as a result of the academic and social interactions. The pieces of clay on the outside are the neighbouring communities in which the learners will share and apply their knowledge.

Step 2: The relationships between the objects

Several relationships emerged between the different objects in the presentation. The straws are located in the kraal, symbolising the learners' embeddedness in their community context. The straws on the left are scattered, representing relationships that are not very close. The straws on the ground represent the stumbling blocks, such as language barriers, and lack of knowledge of the social customs in South Africa, that differ from the

customs in Botswana. The straws on the right are close together, representing the closeness within the community after they had overcome the stumbling blocks. The black and white beads represent the learners' knowledge and previous experiences, while the coloured beads represent all the experience and knowledge the learners accumulated after they had overcome the obstacles and had experienced all the community processes. The bits of clay on the outside of the kraal represent all the external communities that the learners will enter and with whom they will share their accumulated knowledge and wisdom.

Step 3: Insight obtained from the visual presentations and the research question

The visual presentation can be viewed as providing insight into the meaning making of the community of learners in an academic and social context. In this example there is interplay between the individual learner and the community context. At the beginning of the process the relationships were characterised by a lack of cohesion; but after dealing with different stumbling blocks, and after applying previous and new knowledge, the group developed greater cohesion. The learning that took place also meant that knowledge was gained for the benefit of outside communities.

Step 4: Contextual meanings

The kraal represents the group of learners as a community held together by certain commonalities. In this case, the group was brought together by an opportunity to learn. In rural African communities, a kraal has a specific significance. Traditionally, community meetings would be held there, and the interactions would give rise to meanings created in a social context. Furthermore, kraals are also used to keep animals such as cattle, which were

a symbol of wealth for many Africans. The straws represent the individual learners and the relative closeness between them.

The learners entered the new contexts to acquire knowledge and new skills. The beads symbolise the learners' belief that they had acquired knowledge and that they were looking forward to going out and sharing these newly acquired skills with other communities. According to the African worldview, knowledge creation is part of relational processes, based on the use of cultural narratives to transfer this knowledge. Social commitment and sharing with the community are hallmarks of African society (Mkhize, 2004).

The verbatim data were organised into themes as illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: A summary of the main and sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-themes
Meaning making as an emerging process	Initial processes: uncertainty, misperceptions, judgements, lack of closeness Forming of subgroups More integrated group
Processes involved in the construction of meaning	Interactions as medium for learning Communication patterns Leadership Relational support
Communal assumptions underpinning meanings	Collective consciousness and trust Sharing and working together

In the following discussion the themes that emerged from the data are discussed and supported with appropriate literature.

Meaning-making as an emerging process

The creation of meanings manifested itself as a gradual process of greater integration in the group interactions.

Initial group processes

The group started with very tentative group interactions, which were marked by misconceptions and judgements that the learners had about one another as well as the new context. One learner explained his perceptions of the interpersonal interactions as follows: *We come in this class not knowing everybody and then we have judgements about each other and we still have to learn.* Another said: *When you come first you have to wait and see. Sort of study your friends or your mates. Then you realise that, when you realise that you are going toward the same goal, you want to achieve.* The initial group processes were also characterised by uncertainty, and according to Bion (1959), Brown, (1986) and Hoover (2005) groups at this stage can experience a prevailing need for safety and direction.

Some of the misconceptions that the group members had about the new context were based on their perceptions which were informed by history and the media, which one learner expressed as follows: *Well, before, I thought it was a racist town, to be honest. Because I have read about South African history a lot when I was in secondary schools and according to some people they were harassed because of the raids from the Afrikaners specifically.* Another said: *People always talk the closer you get to Jo'burg ... the crime and everything, so I feared for my safety.*

The initial processes in the interpersonal and contextual environments were characterised by unfamiliarity, uncertainty and misconceptions, which are visually illustrated in the following presentation.



Photo 3: Illustration of the phases in the process

In the picture above, the straws on the left are slightly scattered. This represents the lack of closeness in the initial group interactions, which is consistent with the findings of Bion (1959) and Hoover (2005). However, the lack of closeness expressed and the symbolic representations thereof occurred within the confines of the specific social and community context. This kraal, where everything is contained, has a specific cultural and symbolic meaning in an African context. Traditionally, social gatherings and interactions would take place in these kraals, which thus become the space in which community meanings emerge. Kraals are also used to keep animals such as cattle, which were for many generations a symbol of wealth in many African communities. In this context, the kraal represents the community and contexts in which the learners are embedded, and is the space that contains the meanings within this community of learners. The learner explained it as follows: *This represents us as a community. And here it's all of us, the individuals at least grouping together but not close to each other; and we*

come in this class not knowing everybody and then we have judgements about each other, and we still have to learn.

Forming of subgroups

During the process of engaging in a new social context, the learners realised that they had common goals as well as similar orientations and the learners formed smaller groups: *You can find that people can group each other when they have certain things in common; that is why we are into smaller groups. They share something in common, maybe being a religious attribute, maybe they are going to the same church.* According to Bion (1959), this is characteristic of human nature: people respond to uncertainties and anxieties in a community context by forming subgroups. However, these subgroups are temporary and tend to diffuse as the larger group starts interacting and working together to achieve their goal (Bion, 1959; Hoover, 2005). Within the smaller subgroups a climate of sharing, trust and social support emerged, as one of the learners attests: *And having to work together in groups to do presentations, and through that process trust built and people got to know each other and some took the lead and some followed through the normal process.*

More integrated group

Towards the end, a more integrated group emerged from the process. This was illustrated in the visual presentation (see photo 3) in which the straws on the right are close together, representing the closeness which developed in the community during the course of the year. Reciprocal individual, subgroup and collective interactions contributed to the sharing of information, the

creation of knowledge, moving closer to goals and the emergence of an enabling community context. These findings are supported by Beebe and Masterson (2003), Hoover (2005) and Sooliman (1999).

Processes involved in the construction of meaning

Interactions as medium for learning

Interpersonal interactions imply the unpredictable and continuous transactions between people. It emerged that interactions among the learners and other people involved with the learners were critical in the construction of a community in a new context. The nature of the interactions, which can be described as a medium for learning, created a context for enabling processes to unfold. One learner clarified this in the following manner: *Today, I can say it with confidence that I have gained counselling skills through interacting with other students, as well as through interaction with my supervisors.*

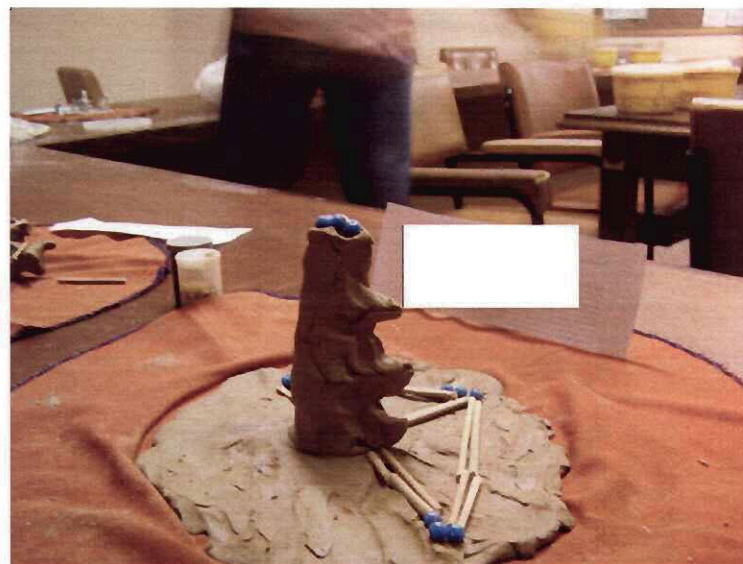


Photo 4: Importance of group interactions for achieving collective goals

According to the learner, the straws represent the interactions and exchange of ideas that connected the learners (illustrated by the beads) to

each other and to their common purpose. The large structure represents a ladder and the beads on top represent the fruits (or goals) that the learners were working towards. The process of achieving these goals involved the individuals climbing this ladder while the social connectedness provided an enabling context. In an African perspective, social connectedness is essential for human growth and increases human value, trust and dignity (Venter, 2003). The interactions between the learners enabled the negotiation of meaning, an exchange of ideas and information, and sharing within their social context. In addition, this social context had the potential to contribute to the learners' activity within the social interaction (Henslin, 1999; Lynch & McConatha, 2006). The interdependence between the learners and their contexts is a key element of existence in an African perspective.

The interactions among the learners are clearly linked to the achievement of goals and success in this context. They contributed to the co-construction of a learning context that was marked by cooperation, trust and sharing. One learner observed: *But when it comes to schoolwork we exchange ideas very well, it draws us closer together to be a bigger group working together towards the same goal.* Another one noted: *When you go into a group, you have to trust the other members of your group that you have the same goals, you have the same objectives.*

Communication patterns

Another important aspect linked to group interactions was the emergence of certain communication patterns. The communication patterns among the community of learners were marked by openness, honesty and an uninhibited exchange of ideas and information, where *nobody was stingy with information.* The open and inclusive communication assisted in the creation of

a context that enabled the learners to adapt to changes in the new social context and to move closer to achieving their aspirations. Furthermore, the learners were able to experience a sense of ownership of the group processes, build relationships and develop trust. This process is outlined by a learner: *In the past I used to do a lot of work alone but now I have learnt that you involve other people so that you can come up with the ideas; in the end of the day they will have the spirit of ownership. They will also feel that they also participated in that activity - a feeling of belonging to that group.* The quality of the information in a new social context informs personal judgement, decision-making and perceptions (Letzring, Funder & Wells, 2006).

Leadership

The findings also indicate that leadership assisted the learners to adapt to the changing contexts. The nature of leadership within this context emerged in specific and African-conscious ways. The leadership role within the community was delegated to one of the learners on the grounds of this learner's abilities and knowledge of the new environment. There were specific roles attached to this position (Banhegyi & Banhegyi, 2003; Neri, 2006), which included being a spokesperson for the group and providing feedback on interactions with lecturers. The designated leader was able to keep the group together and became the line of communication between the learners and the lecturers: *I think I would say, the leaders that we have, is just that in this situation we tried to give somebody who knows and can easily convince when it need the convincing part of it, we wanted to have so that he can do that he can talk on our behalf.* This learner went on to say: *I think P***** has made a good job. To keep the group together, because he was always giving us the feedback if there was something that he wanted to go and forward to some of*

the lecturers or whoever. It is clear that leadership in this context involved promoting access to information and speaking for the group. This encouraged group cohesion. According to Banhegyi and Banhegyi (2003), this represents another hallmark of African-conscious leadership.



Photo 5: Importance of relational support

Relational support

The above presentation illustrates relational support that emerged from the interactions. In the presentation, the learner explained that it requires two oxen to pull the plough, and that one ox alone will not be able to pull the plough effectively. They applied this concept to the interactions in their community, in which the learners needed to work together and to support each other in order to reach their goals. This working together, supportive sharing and compassion are some of the critical virtues that a “real person” would possess in an African worldview (Khumalo, 2005; Renner, Peltzer & Phaswana, 2003). One learner compared this process of relational support to a three-legged pot: *It symbolises the support; the tri-pot symbolised the support from the lecturers who assisted me with everything that I needed. My*

colleagues here are the people that I worked with, the support that we shared, the interrelatedness that I shared with my colleagues here as the group; and my expectations are now coming up.

Relational support in this community meant that learners helped each other to overcome various challenges. For example, group members would stand by their classmates in times of personal tragedy or success. One learner formulated it as follows: *We have had incidences, some of us here, where we have lost a loved one; and we have had incidences where we had good experiences. And in all those circumstances, the group has rallied behind one who was bereaved or the one who had something to celebrate, even also the lecturer, so they are quite supportive.*

Relational support also included respect for diversity and acceptance of individuals' differences. One participant explained this as follows: *We are carrying these differences, but there is acceptance of those differences, criticising it to an extent that it rejects nobody. Because an acceptance, there was result the whole focus of, okay there are differences, but let's work with it; let's work around it and let's get a common interest and work with common goals. Rather than focusing on that which is not the same.*

The process of relational support within this community may be captured in a Tswana proverb that says *Bobedi bo bolaya noga*. Literally translated, this means "Two can kill a snake". The meanings that emerged within this community of learners exemplify the collective nature of this community. This sociocentric inclination is characteristic of most African cultures, where harmony and integration are held in high esteem. The ensuing interdependence between the learners and their context created an enabling environment for survival, adaptation and thriving communities (Bamford,

2007; Mpofo, 2001; Roos & Klopper, 2008; Venter, 2003). This is expressed as follows by a learner: *The trust, the empathy that we have for one another and all these things are still holding together, but we have developed from the knowledge and everything that we got from here, we are now flowering.*

Relational support cannot emerge outside the context of the cooperative and cohesive relationships in community life (Westaway, Seager, Rheeder & Van Zyl, 2005; Oei & Browne, 2006). This implies that relationships in community life are a fundamental feature of social support (Westaway et al., 2005; Cranford, 2004). Likewise, it may also be argued that relational support is founded on social relationships, and that it is realised within social interactions, interpersonal communication and the occurrences of everyday life. Relationships in the community of learners were characterised by interdependence, working together, sharing of resources, and a spirit of oneness (Antoni, 2005; Pinel, Long, Alexander, Landan & Pyszczynski, 2006).

Communal assumptions underpinning meanings

Communal assumptions enabled learners to act within their community context because the community had “agreed” on these assumptions as guiding principles while pursuing its ambitions (Benzies & Allen, 2001). According to Beebe and Masterson (2003), this carries with it the expectation that these assumptions form part of the interactions in the community, thus contributing to the development of trust in the particular social context (Beebe & Masterson, 2003; Krishanan, Martin & Noorderhoven, 2006; Rotenberg, McDonald & King, 2002). As a result, the learners became more certain of and were better able to predict the behaviour of their peers.

Collective consciousness and trust

A collective consciousness and mutual trust emerged within the community as the learners worked together towards achieving their goals. In this regard, one learner said: *And also the trust that you have for one another, the empathy that you have, one for one another, it will build you up into one whole thing.* Another remarked: *And here it's us grouping together now since everybody is moving as an individual here and have some specific resources, we don't have all the resources that you need as an individual. So we needed each other to survive. So we used each other's resources, information and everything.*

According to Pinel et al. (2006), the encountering of similar subjective experiences contributes to the creation of a community context through which a collective consciousness may emerge. This collective consciousness promotes the attainment of goals, the development of a sense of belonging and feelings of mutual responsibility within a community (Antoni, 2005; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1976; Whyte & Schermbrucker, 2004). In this context, the majority of learners had similar subjective experiences of change and adaptation. They all came from different backgrounds and entered the new context with similar aspirations. They had to find their own accommodation and adjust to the new social environment. According to Pinel et al. (2006) and Griskevicius, Goldstein, Mortensen, Gialdini and Kenrick (2006), this can contribute to the development of a collective consciousness and trusting relationships. One of the learners explained: *We exchange ideas very well, it draws us closer together to be a bigger group working together towards the same goal.* Another said: *Working in a group, you have to involve other people so that you can come up with the ideas and also helping those people*

to take part in the discussion so that in the end of the day they will have the spirit of ownership. They will also feel that they also participated in that activity. They will think that a feeling of belonging to that group.

According to Menkiti (cited in Mkhize, 2004), this bonding is founded on the understanding that certain tasks can be dealt with more efficiently in a community context. To illustrate the process of coming together in pursuit of similar ends, Dzobo (cited in Mkhize, 2004) uses the analogy of a hand: the palm constitutes the community context while the fingers are the individuals in that community. Although individuals can function quite well on their own, they remain embedded in their community context. The fingers can only realise their true potential in the context of the whole. To form part of the "hand", one has to affirm the standards that exist in a particular context (Mkhize, 2004).

This affirmation improves the likelihood that the individual will be accepted in the community, and contributes to the development of trust among the learners in the community context (Beebe & Masterson, 2003; Klunklin & Greenwood, 2006). One learner expressed this as follows: *And the social part would mean working with each other, you know, when you go into a group, you have to trust the other members of your group that you have the same goals, you have the same objectives. You have, you know what you want to achieve as a group and together you work towards achieving that goal. You work towards realising that aim.* Another learner remarked: *You need to have trust by sharing ideas, working together cooperatively. And then that contribute to making the success of the group, working towards a common goal.* A third learner added: *I would say what made us to stick together was helping each other when it comes to information, we trusted each other. So no one of us was stingy with sharing when it comes to*

information. The emergence of trust in the community was also encouraged by the open interactions and communication between the learners. The nature of the interactions and communication patterns contributed to the sharing of personal information, which further promoted the development of trust within the community (Egan, 2000; Rotenberg et al., 2002).

Sharing and working together

Interactions in this community were also characterised by cooperation and the sharing of information, skills, and other resources. The notion of sharing and working together is one of the defining features of the African worldview, as explained by Venter (2003) and Bamford (2007). Interdependence, compassion and caring for others in the community are also crucial aspects of African philosophy (Venter, 2003). This philosophy affirms mutual respect and deep allegiance to the collective identity (Venter, 2003). This community of learners demonstrated a sociocentricity that defines most African cultures: it emphasises sharing and support, and recognises the fundamental interdependence of humankind (Mpofu, 2001; Venter, 2003).

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the study was to explore some of the processes and functions of people in the construction of social meanings that emerged in a community of learners who had to adjust to new social and academic contexts.

One of the prevailing meanings in the community involved cooperation between the learners to achieve particular ends. However, the free market capitalist ideologies that are taking root in contemporary African societies cannot be ignored (Callero, 2003). For example, Mpofu (2001) found that Zimbabwean college students from a Shona cultural background tended to

support the notion of an individualistic self-concept. Such ideologies prioritise competition and personal achievement over social connectedness and *ubuntu* (Venter, 2003). These aspects did not emerge as socially created meanings in the community; however, they may have some influence at an individual level.

The movement of people from one place to another for the purpose of study is nothing new. As such, people are required to adapt to new contexts. The findings in this study point to the importance of interactions in such contexts, specifically from an African viewpoint. An important consideration, which was not explored in this study, is the power relations in the community that influence the construction of meanings. Such a study would shed light on other processes that influence learners' adaptation to new contexts.

It is also recommended that future research investigate conflict management in groups – although it did not emerge in this research process, it is prominent in most literature on group processes.

CONCLUSION

The reciprocal nature of interactions between people and their contexts was noted in this research. This is in line with Denzin and Lincoln's (2000, 188) finding that "contextualism moves back and forth, from the particular and the situational to the general and the historical". Enabling processes such as interactions facilitated negotiation, which again fed into individual meaning-making. This resulted in trust, which promoted the group's ability to provide in the needs of its individual members. The continuous processes between individuals and their social contexts were maintained by open and honest communication, facilitative, democratic leadership and social support. It seems as if the way in which people with an African worldview adapts to

change may be facilitated by opportunities to formulate collective goals and the provision of an environment in which the sharing of resources and spaces that facilitate community development are nurtured. In this research collectiveness was expressed as opening up spaces for others, working together, sharing resources and helping others to build on their strengths, to increase collective strength. This research emphasises the importance of individual embeddedness in a community to adjust to new community contexts.

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