



Insights on student leadership using social dream drawing: Six propositions for the transformation role of South African student leaders

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Background: Student leadership is central to the South African transformation agenda in higher education. Even so the understanding of student leadership, especially regarding its purpose and its implementation varies across contexts.

Aim: This article aims to present propositions for student leadership practice considering the current diverse and often fragmented understanding of student leadership. Such propositions should aid the formation of a streamlined multi-levelled and systemic co-curriculum for student leadership that equips student leaders for their significant transformation task.

Setting: The study was conducted in a South African higher education institution within the associated Student Affairs department. The university where data was collected is referred to as a historically White university.

Methods: Social dream drawing was utilised to elicit data that enabled insights into student leadership. The data was analysed by pluralistically fusing discourse analysis with a psychodynamic interpretation.

Results: The findings reveal a preoccupation in student leadership with South African historical narratives and the implications thereof for the present, and future, of the country. Additionally, student leaders indicated that there are complex psychological implications that result from their leadership experiences. Six propositions for student leadership are presented.

Conclusion: The insights gained from the research study have the potential to contribute positively to higher education legislation and student development practice, particularly regarding the psychological conflicts that student leaders experience, and to the possible ways to resolve these. Because student leaders are key to the transformation agenda in South Africa, these insights can contribute directly towards their suitability in fulfilling this role.

Keywords: identity; diversity; higher education; social dream drawing; student leadership support.

Introduction: Student leadership and transformation in South African universities

Transformation in South Africa and its universities followed the inception of a democratic South Africa in 1994 (Jansen 2004; Le Grange 2011). Universities, therefore, are key contributors to this transformation, including cultivating an inclusive society (Maassen & Cloete 2006). Responding to the democratic shifts, the Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation of 1996 in South Africa (Bengu 1996) evolved its description of student leadership. The working understanding of student leadership continues to evolve (Jansen 2004; Luescher, Webbstock & Bhengu 2020), resulting in varied and uneven understanding and praxis of this leadership, including its formal and informal roles and settings (Getz & Roy 2013; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014). Nevertheless, student leadership remains central to the transformation agenda in South African universities because of its legislated participation (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014) and its influence on institutional culture evidenced by various student movements (Griffiths 2019).

Students also perceive their leadership to be politically charged (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014; Luescher et al. 2020). The landscape of student leadership in the post-apartheid era has seen radical change and shifting priorities (Jansen 2004; Swartz et al. 2019) including the significant role of student leaders in social transformation (Speckman 2015), curriculum

transformation (Du Preez, Verhoef & Simmonds 2016; Griffiths 2019), and in issues of access, diversity and diversification (Cross & Carpentier 2009). Considering the transformational and deconstructed space of higher education in South Africa (Bazana & Mogotsi 2017), it is essential to explore student leadership operating in this space towards achieving alignment, consolidation of leadership practices, to ensure effectiveness and provide proactive student support. We explored the insights that could be derived about the South African transformation role of student leaders, by studying group-as-a-whole, through social dream drawing where group and societal dynamics could emerge with the intention that these insights could potentially inform transformation.

Freud and Jung are known for dream-work with a clinical, individualistic, and diagnostic focus (Long 2013, 2017). Freud conceptualised dreams as linked to pathology; thus, a physiological mechanism protecting or guarding us against sleep interruption (Schneider 2010). Accordingly, dreams cannot tell us about our awakened reality. Jung saw dreams as psychic mechanisms communicating essential messages important for individuation (Jung 1936). Although differently conceptualised, both Freud and Jung referred to dream analysis as a means to acquire knowledge about the unconscious (Long 2017). Aligned to Bion, however, our view asserts that dreams are psychological work in progress for the emotional processing of lived experiences (Schneider 2010). Therefore, in the dreaming process, lived experiences are made available for meaning-making rather than analysed or interpreted (Mersky 2008). Dreams are consequently conceptualised as the bridge between conscious and unconscious thinking in a two-way communication during sleep and awaken life (Mersky 2008; Schneider 2010). We will therefore use narrated dream and dream drawings to explore and explain experiences of student leaders from a group, organisational and societal perspective without focusing on the individual participants respectively (Long 2013).

Mersky (2008) formulated social dream drawing, grounded in social dreaming that was proposed by Lawrence (1998) by integrating Lawrence's and Bion's work. Social dream drawing is based on the idea that dreams represent the group's thinking (or even unconscious thoughts), which can be revealed using a stimulus, namely a drawing. Dream drawings are therefore symbols, signs, and signifiers that reveal the associative unconscious, which is the unconscious interconnection within a group (Long 2013), which Jung (1936) calls the collective unconscious. Jung's (1936) collective unconscious is composed of multiple individual (and independent) psyche of those in the collective rather than a mental network of the collective, which is interconnected. Social dream drawing, however, elicits a social and interconnected collective process. This process is embedded in each group member's dream, stimulating the group to co-construct social meaning without focusing on the individual dreamer.

Because of differences, such as, age, race, gender and ideology, and its concomitant anxieties, consequent unconscious dynamics amongst group members evolve into a tacit, interdependent, unconscious and collusive lattice or set of connection which gives rise to the group's mentality, that is, the group-as-a-whole (May 2010; Wells 1985). Insights derived from the group-as-a-whole therefore can contribute fresh perspectives and new dimensions to student leadership literature, understanding and practice. Considering the international and continental landscape of student leadership, this leadership in South Africa contributes a unique transformation role given its historical, political, socio-economic and psychological milieu (Sebola 2019). Additionally, the apparent dearth of scholarship on transformation (Du Preez et al. 2016), especially on student leadership capacity, necessitates academic exploration of the topic. The expectations are higher on these leaders because of this role, contributing anxiety and a leadership burden to them (Pule, in press). Although two decades into democracy, South African student leaders continue to live in a ground-breaking era where they are faced with the historic systemic dynamics of the country's transformation process (Luescher et al. 2020).

Student leadership context in South Africa

South African student leadership takes on a different form in South Africa as compared to other contexts (Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Sebola 2019). Predominantly, South African student leadership relates to student governance or student representation as indicated by the Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation of 1996 (Bengu 1996), and the *Higher Education Act*, No. 101 of 1997 (Sebola 2019). These Acts mandate South African universities to recognise student representatives in the highest level of decision making within university governance. This amendment to the *Higher Education Act* resulted from the transformation efforts of the South African Higher Education sector, post-apartheid (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014). Hence, Student Representative Councils (SRCs) are the formally institutionally recognised student organisation of leadership in universities (Speckman 2015). Additionally, Speckman (2015), explained that whilst SRCs enjoy the recognition by university management as guided by the *Higher Education Act*, this leadership occurs beyond SRCs by including its sub-councils and residence committees.

Alongside elected leaders, students involved in leadership programmes concentrate mainly on the professional aspects of leadership which are linked to the needs of corporate industry (Getz & Roy 2013; Mukoza & Goodman 2013). Such programmes include the South African Washington International Programme (SAWIP), the University of the Free State Leadership for Change Programme, the programme of the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute at the University of South Africa (UNISA), and the participation of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in the Common Purpose and the Future Health Leaders

Programme of the University of Cape Town. The goal of these programmes is to equip students with leadership competencies including high-level decision-making capacity (Mukoza & Goodman 2013). However, the programmes lack the mandate for its students to implement this competence in the context of a university (Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014).

As with transformation in Higher Education (Du Preez et al. 2016), global pressures and activism continue to exert a systemic outcome on South African students (Griffiths 2019). Within student leadership, this can be mainly evident through student activists. The role of these activists was recently highlighted through the #Fallist movements (Griffiths 2019; Swartz et al. 2019). #Fallist movements were student protests, particularly those which occurred during 2015/2016, which foregrounded demands for free education, and demonstrated a general dissatisfaction of young South Africans regarding unfulfilled promises of freedom (Swartz et al. 2019). Student leaders involved in activism succeeded in attracting the attention of university management and the wider university community despite these leaders not belonging to a particular formal structure. Their influence led to changes in the financial and funding models of universities, including other policies relating to access to education and student success (Becker 2017). Njikiktjien (2019) explained that the so-called 'born frees' who are South African youth born after 1994, are looking for tangible transformation. Observationally, student activists have the potential to tap into this need even as non-positional leaders.

Insights to aid student leadership support for the South Africa transformation role

Insights into the student leadership transformation role can highlight the collective impact strategy paradigm. This strategy offers a perspective that can span the matrix of role players and the development of students, in a culture of evidence that informs co-curricular efforts (Culp & Dungy 2012). It is undeniable that student leaders are the future leaders of the country (Luescher et al. 2020); thus, understanding student leadership involves obtaining insight into the future leadership of a country. Currently an obstacle for student leadership in the researchers' observation, is that students elected to governance structures are unlikely to have been intentionally and specifically equipped with the necessary graduate attributes to perform their mandated role. This limits their prospects even though they are presented with high-level leadership opportunities within university structures (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014; Mukoza & Goodman 2013). Contrarily, students in development programmes may develop and progress in leadership competencies, but the university seldom benefits because these students get involved in activities outside the framework of higher education legislation. Student activists, despite being influential, receive no development attention either.

Furthermore, the collective impact strategy should focus on developing student engagement and leadership within the co-governance framework of universities (Bengu 1996;

Republic of South Africa 1997) towards their collective transformation role. This would enable universities to provide these (future) leaders with appropriate leadership nurturance (Sebola 2019). This article acknowledges the status quo with its challenges, potential resistance to change and varying investment in student leaders – matters embedded in institutional cultures (Bazana & Mogotsi 2017, Booysen 2016, Higham 2012; Thaver 2009). It aims to understand student leadership in a way that higher education and the student leadership community may productively revisit the implementation of student leadership to enhance the organisational effectiveness of student leadership with reference to student leaders' transformation task.

Theoretical framework and the social dream drawing

A socio-analytic theoretical framework, which focuses on integrating and developing methodologies and theories that are based on psychoanalysis, group relations, social systems thinking, organisational behaviour, and social dreaming (Long 2017) was employed. Divergent from Freudian individual psychology of the repressed unconscious, socio-analysis as initially formulated by Bion and coined by Bain in 1999, explores the dynamics of the group-as-a-whole (the group/system) rather than the individual (Long 2013). According to socio-analysis, analysis occur on the individual and collective levels exploring conscious and unconscious dynamics (Long 2017), as is in social dream drawing (Mersky 2008).

Design and methods

A qualitative design in a historically White university as a research setting was used. The socio-analytic method employed is social dream drawing by Mersky (2008). Six dream drawings provided the data that was grouped to identify the main themes (Boydell 2009; Mersky 2012) about student leadership. Data emerged through a combination of talk and visual representation of consciously expressed, and unconscious dynamics, of the social system, as they play out (Long 2017; Mersky 2012). The drawing is the visual data, a 'third eye' through which the associative unconscious emerges (Mersky 2012). Verbal data refers to the description of the dream and its drawing. Additionally, the free associations and meaning-making of the free associations of dream and the drawing about student leadership in South Africa add to verbal data (Mersky 2008).

The participants received an information sheet when registering their participation, wherein they were encouraged to keep a record of their sleep dreams. From this record, the participants were asked, through the information sheet, to make a drawing of a dream which they related to student leadership, and to bring this to the data collection session. Both researchers conducted the data collection and analysis for theoretical and methodological value, and rigour (eds. Leedy & Ormrod 2014; Mersky & Sievers 2019). Member-checking to ascertain the credibility of the researchers' understanding of the groups' contributions and reflexivity,

that is, the researchers' awareness and questioning of how their own and each other's ideas shaped the findings formed part of rigour (eds. Leedy & Ormrod 2014). Consistent with a qualitative design that is hypothesis generating (Thirsk & Clark 2017), the data collection session was used to generate a working hypothesis about the co-construction of student leadership in a South African university. The findings were applied to elicit insights about the student leadership transformation role, a role which became a main theme during the data collection.

Participants

A purposive and volunteered sample (eds. Leedy & Ormrod 2014) of six student leaders was included in data collection. Table 1 shows the description of the group of volunteered participants.

Instruments and procedures

During the session, six dream drawings, which were allocated 1 h each, were explored in a three-step process. Firstly, each participant related their dream to the group and explained their accompanying drawing. Afterwards other participants could ask clarifying questions regarding the dream or its drawing. Secondly, the group members contributed free associations. Through these contributions, the dream becomes the dream of the group, to make further meaning about student leadership through the associative unconscious (Mersky & Sievers 2019). Thirdly, reflections about the social construction of student leadership at a South African university occurred. These reflections contributed to a meaning-making conversation about student leadership based on the dreams, dream drawings and the shared free associations (Mersky 2012). The researchers' role included helping participants make links between the different drawings, identify themes that emerged from the dream drawings and link the emerging discourse to issues within the student leadership environment (Mersky 2012). Resultant preliminary hypotheses about student leadership in South Africa were tested with the participants in-session (Mersky 2008).

Data was collected in the form of transcribed text derived from in-session voice recorded data (description of the dreams, free associations and meaning making of the descriptions of dreams and drawings), photographs of the

dream drawings, and the reflection notes that researchers took during each session.

Data analysis

The data analysis was initiated during the data collection session when researchers offered reflections to test the preliminary hypotheses, as described in the Instrument and Procedure section. Post-session, the transcribed text was studied by the researchers. For this, Clarke and Hoggert (2009) and Parker (1997, 2014, 2015), helped us bridge psychodynamics and discourse analysis. Bion's (1961) foundational assumptions that groups experience anxiety to establish, organise and maintain themselves, was adopted along with Long's (2013, 2016, 2017) work on organisational and social dynamics. These theoretical positions provided a framework from which to identify themes about the dynamics of student leadership. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) provided a framework from which to conceptualise the anxiety of the group which produces defences/defence mechanisms (Long 2017) leading to the 'defended participant'. Consequently, discourses in the transcribed text were studied with the intention to link them with a 'defended participant' (Boydell 2009), who is group-as-a-whole (Long 2017). Literature on defences/defence mechanisms (Klein 1960; Kohut 2004; Lemma 2003) supported this understanding.

Connections between descriptions of the dreams and drawings, free associations as well as the reflections or meaning making conversation were made. These were then integrated into categories of data to create themes regarding student leadership at a South African university (Boydell 2009). From this an integrated working hypothesis (Figure 3), that suggests the underlying issues regarding student leadership in South Africa was constructed. This is a view on how the integrated themes, and the in-session tested preliminary working hypotheses, collectively makes sense (Mersky 2008). Finally, data analysis occurred during member checks when the integrated working hypothesis was tested. Six propositions regarding student leadership transformation role were extrapolated from the integrated working hypothesis (Figure 4).

Ethical considerations

Ethics clearance was obtained from the College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee, UNISA ethics committee (number: 2013/CEMS/IOP/00115). The appropriate director of Student Affairs granted permission to recruit student leaders for data collection purposes. The participants completed and signed an information sheet and consent form indicating their willingness to participate. To address possible emotional distress consequent to the research, a debriefing session was held after the data collection. Through the research gate keeper, arrangements were made with the student counselling centre to provide for emotional containment when needed. Each dream drawing was allocated a number, that is, 1, 2, 3

TABLE 1: Description of the group participants.

Dream	Diversity factors	Age	Participation in student leadership
1	White female	20	Student culture committee Executive
2	White male	23	Academic council Leadership development programme
3	Black female	21	Academic council SRC elections candidate
4	Black female	22	Currently in a student judiciary role
5	Black female	21	SRC
6	Black male	22	Faculty student committee International exchange leadership programme

Source: Pule, N., 2017, 'The social construction of student leadership in a South African University', Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, UNISA.

SRC, Student Representative Councils.

without linking the dream or the allocated number to the participant, for confidentiality purposes. Consistent with the philosophy of the method (Mersky 2008), no personal identifiable information was contained in the social dream drawings nor in the report thereof.

Findings

Themes were identity and relational dynamics; Defended student leadership identity; Conversation about the anxiety of working with diversity dynamics; Student leaders' need for support. Each of these themes will be discussed as part of the propositions about the transformation role of student leaders. Quotations or extracts from the transcription recorded of student leaders, were pertinent.

Identity and relational dynamics

The discourse about a sense of belonging (Pule 2017) in the transforming university highlight identity and relational dynamics. Particularly, splitting (Kohut 2004) over race and gender generated discomfort within the group. This discomfort inspired the desire for a common vision, as evident in the quotation shown below. This common vision included contributing to the transformation agenda:

'But I think that we don't stand with each other for the major issues, you know, and I think when that happens, like she says, there's obviously a whole lot of shots fired, and I think that's the image I get is that the student leaders who need some form of common vision.' (Dream 6, P6)

The experiences of a common vision are complicated by the leaders' identity crisis pertaining to identity as leaders vs. identity as students. As students, identity (including on the basis of race and gender) often referred to loyalty to their constituency, their affiliation, and consensus with the student body in general. The elements of identity as students may clash with the common vision regarding identity as a student leader, compelling student leaders to wrestle with the splitting dynamics of the student identity. The following quotation illustrates this:

'Another thing I think of is as student leaders, most of the time we forget that we are students.' (Dream 6, P3)

This identity crisis threatened their sense of belonging as students. Depending on their obligation to the *Higher Education Act* and related regulations or procedures, the participants could also feel torn regarding their obligation to management. Because SRCs and their related committees play a role within management structures, they may endure this crisis more than other student leaders. Trying to negotiate these issues seemingly could lead to a feeling of being alone. For example, in this quotation:

'Like now I'm like that radical girl in the SRC. I will pursue something even if everyone else doesn't agree – it's not my problem – because you know, sometimes I just feel like my teammates don't get it and that's the parts where I'm alone in the waves.' (Dream 5, P5)

The quotation shows the black female student leader perceiving herself to be alone, without support or camaraderie towards her transformation-related portfolio. She also perceived that in being black and female, others did not understand her unique challenges as a student leader regarding her role. Bazana and Mogotsi (2017), noted the challenges and potential resistance to change as being embedded in institutional cultures. The quotation shown above suggests congruence with Le Grange (2011) and Thaver (2009) in that women and black student leaders uniquely experience historically White universities in their introduction of a culture of transformation in the country, integration of inter-cultural communities and resolving social tensions.

Defended student leadership identity

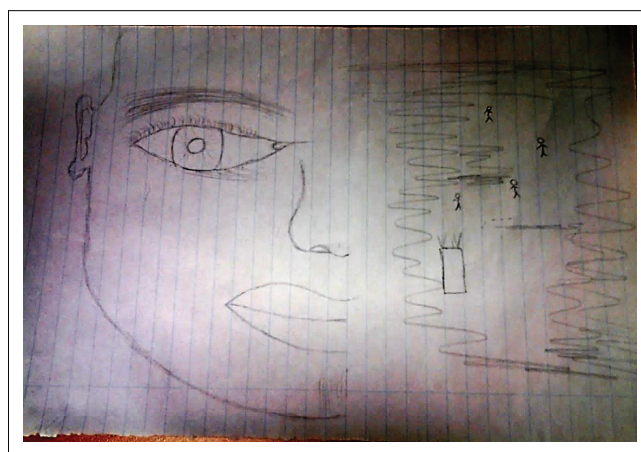
Drawing on Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) concept of the defended participant, as researchers we made sense of the student leaders' identity presentation by calling this phenomenon 'defended student leadership identity'.

The participants talked about the need to employ defence as in this quotation:

'That would be my strong-suit like getting us over the hole, but the snake handler, like the cane thing, you handle the snake with that. The strong suit and the snake handler signify strategies for defence against the snakes which point to their perceived threat within the student leadership environment.' (Dream 1, P1)

As a result of navigating the transforming university, dynamics in student leadership elicit anxiety; this is ultimately responded to through defence mechanisms. Examples are demonstrating omnipotence (Lemma 2003), splitting (Kohut 2004), narcissistic injury and denial (Bion 1961; Kohut 2004), self-preservation and the depressive position (Bion 1961; Klein 1960). To illustrate taking up defence, the participants referred to the term 'facelessness' as demonstrated by the quotation and dream drawing (Figure 1):

'So, in the end you are faceless, but you are part of something and you can contribute.' (Dream 1, P2)



Source: Pule, N., 2017, 'The social construction of student leadership in a South African University', Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, UNISA.

FIGURE 1: Drawing of Dream 6, the half-face dream.

Appearing faceless implies withdrawing from the spotlight. Potentially, this is an unconscious denial (Bion 1961) about facing the demands of the transformation. Furthermore, facelessness could be the unconscious denial (Kohut 2004) of the extent of reconciliation already achieved in South Africa.

Conversation about the anxiety of working with diversity dynamics

Student leaders want to 'leave a mark' (Dream 4, chorus). Their compulsion to act as leaders who can deliver was indicated by their anxiety to have conversations about working with diversity dynamics. Diversity dynamics are interactional complexities based on an assumption of subjective identities which emerge from similarities and differences amongst people (May 2012). Talking about this was their action of contributing to the transformation mandate. Trust was highlighted as a key component towards having the emerging conversation. Defence mechanisms are used more when student leaders struggle to experience trust:

'So, you must trust that whoever throws the ladder will throw it right, you know what I mean. So, I think it also alludes to exactly what she's saying, trusting people which is also important in student leadership.' (Dream 1, P6)

Student leaders' need for support

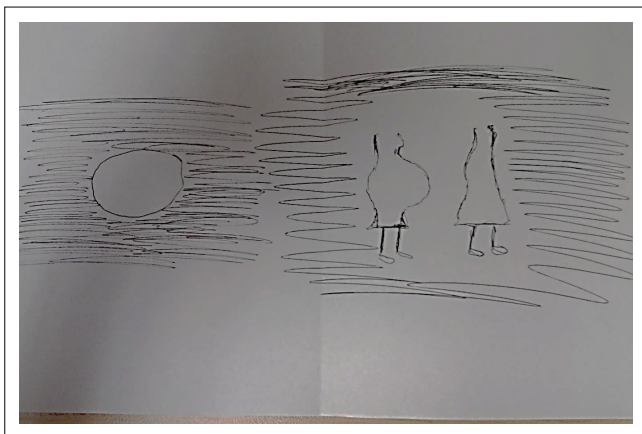
Student leaders may need support because of the blurry context of student leadership as illuminated through the following quotation:

'Yeah, it's very abstract. It's very dark at certain times, it's very ... broad daylight. (Extract from Dream 4).' (Dream 1, P1)

'I understand what you mean ... it's not like racist?.' (P4)

'That's just blurry.' (P3)

The blurry context refers to student leaders not always having clarity and being uncertain whilst working with diversity dynamics. This makes the conversation about their anxiety even more daunting and motivates the use of defences. Consequently, it shows that student leaders need support. It seemed that they found the task of student



Source: Pule, N., 2017, 'The social construction of student leadership in a South African University', Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, UNISA.

FIGURE 2: Drawing of Dream 4, the stillborn dream.

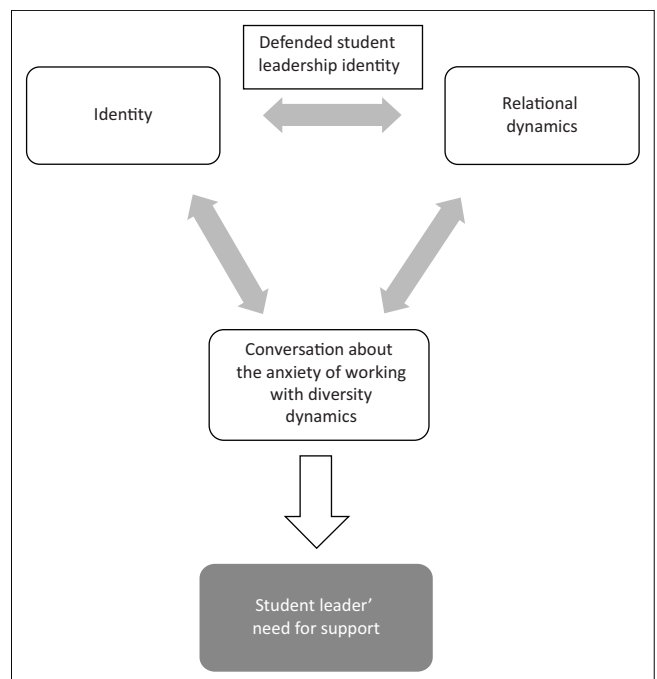
leadership overwhelming and developmentally overbearing, such that instances of emotional labour were reported by some participants, as follows:

'Sometimes they don't know what this strength façade of yours, what it's doing to you as a person when you're sitting alone in your room and you're dealing with all of this that's happening. In public you have to be strong for the people that elected you.' (Debriefing: P4)

During member checks, one participant reported having been treated for major depressive disorder resulting from the combined pressures of her academics and student leadership role. This becomes a further indicator of student leaders' need for support.

The stillborn dream drawing in Figure 2, highlighted the emotional labour experienced by student leaders. This circumstance is associated with their fear that they might not be able to deliver, as in the stillborn dream. They associated the stillborn metaphor with those leadership efforts that they or their constituencies, perceive to be unfruitful.

The themes contributing to the integrated working hypothesis are shown in Figure 3. The hypothesis indicates that the social construction of student leadership at a South African university comprises identity, mainly in student leadership; relational dynamics in higher education and within student leadership; and lastly, a conversation about the anxiety of working with diversity dynamics within which student leaders showed a need for support because of the defended student leadership identity that is presented.



Source: Adapted from Pule, N., 2017, 'The social construction of student leadership in a South African University', Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, UNISA.

FIGURE 3: Integrated working hypothesis: The social construction of student leadership at a South African university.

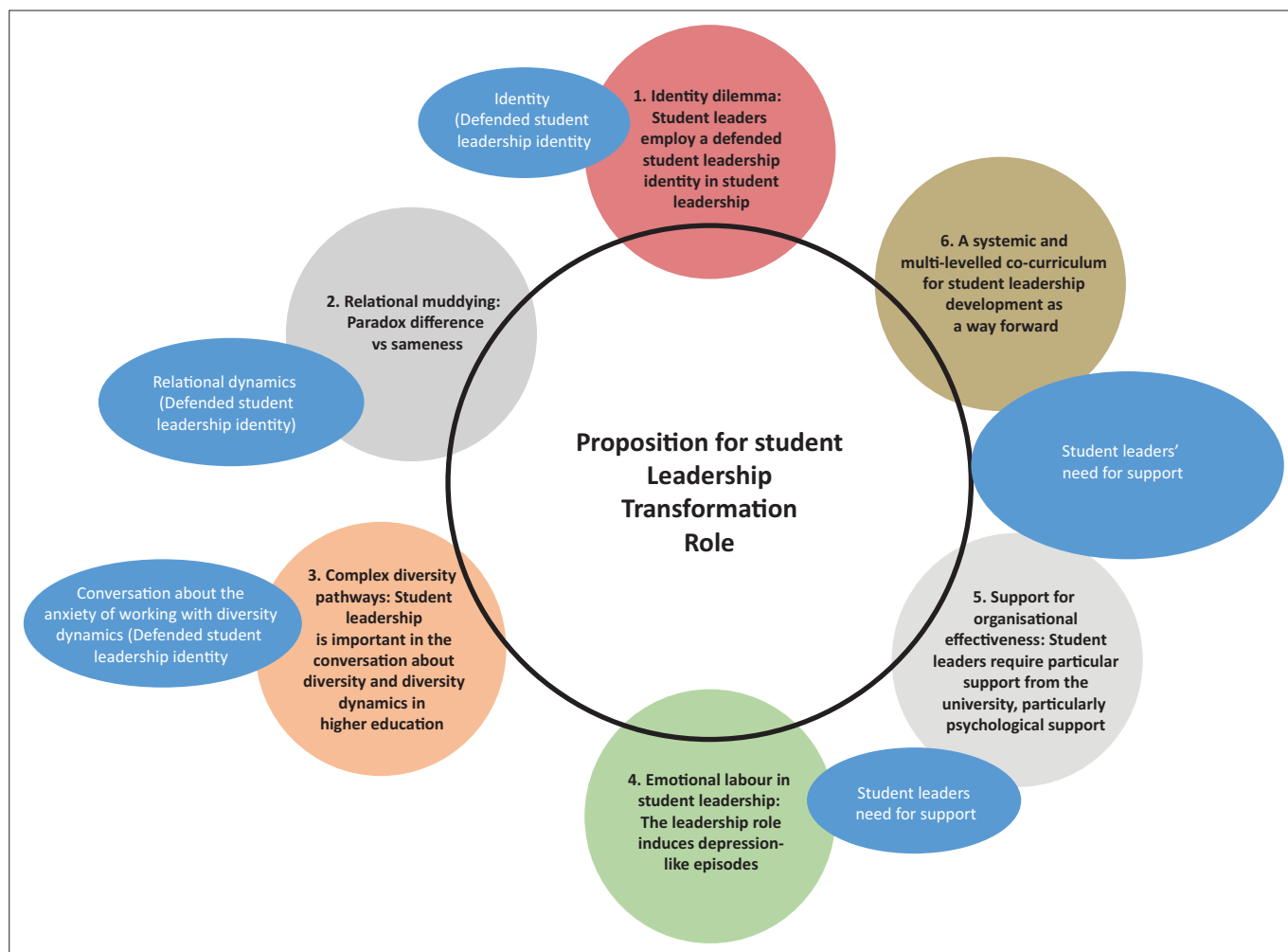


FIGURE 4: Integrated themes and propositions for the student leadership transformation role.

The integrated working hypothesis was used to extrapolate six propositions relevant to the student leadership transformation role.

Discussion: Propositions for the student leadership transformation role

The propositions made by the student leadership after the social dream drawing discussion about the social construction of student leadership at a South African university, are now discussed. These propositions are a response to their expressed need for support and thus should aid their transformation role. Figure 4, diagrammatically shows the themes from the Findings section, linked to propositions for the student leadership transformation role.

Identity dilemma: A defended student leadership identity in student leadership

The findings show that the student leadership identity dilemma is marred by the identity crisis regarding identity as leaders versus identity as students. Consequently, the identity dilemma underlies how student leaders perform in their role, given that they engage through defences or a

defended student leadership identity. Additionally, these defences are realised in the context of diversity dynamics. Thus, congruent with Speckman (2015), the leadership of students motivates them to explore their various identities in a dynamic and diverse environment. This is useful for their transformation role even though they may employ self-preservation (or omnipotence) as strategies (Bion 1961; Klein 1960) to cope. To aid their transformation, the psychological implication that is specific to the identity dilemma should be conceptualised in light of the tension that exists when engaging with difficult issues such as diversity dynamics, in higher education.

Relational muddying: Paradox of difference versus sameness

The participants expressed a wish to keep a consistent identity across various diversity aspects because of the belief that sameness encourages less conflict. Agazarian (2012) suggested that homogeneity within groups facilitates the integration of differences between members. Student leaders, therefore, attempt to achieve cohesion by striving toward a common goal or purpose through using relational dynamics to defend themselves from the discomfort proposed by difference. Leibowitz et al. (2007) found that a

desperate need for commonality may predispose members to prioritise agreement at the cost of confronting problematic issues to the desired degree. The resultant tension can build up into a later expression of aggression. Possibly the #Fallist movement (Griffiths 2019; Swartz et al. 2019) was an example of this. Expressing contention creates relational muddying amongst student leaders. It could be within this relational muddying that the transformation agenda gets derailed or complicated. This outcome can become overwhelming; hence the student leaders fantasise about sameness to reduce the anxiety that they experience regarding the diversity dynamics encountered.

Complex diversity pathways: Student leadership is important in the conversation about diversity and diversity dynamics in higher education

The data reveals the possibility that student leadership may be a space for making sense of diversity (dynamics) in South Africa because of the participants' need (or anxiety) to have conversation about working with diversity dynamics. The identity dilemma and relational muddying within working with diversity and related dynamics results in complex diversity pathways. This is because of the findings that showed that the dynamics associated with sense of belonging in the transforming university generates the leadership identity crisis. This phenomenon has implications for both the themes of identity and relational dynamics. The complexity regarding the dynamics of working with diversity within student leadership positions these leaders to connect inconsistently with others, based on sameness or difference. For example, black female leaders can identify with white female leaders on the basis of gender whilst the two groups may have a different operationalisation, or ideas on operationalising transformation, based on their differing racial backgrounds. Simultaneously, the various identities of student leaders, including the aspects of the dilemmas this generates, are all key contributors to the conversation regarding working with diversity dynamics. To be hopeful about a bright South African future, to resolve their leadership identity, and to stay focussed on working with diversity dynamics, student leaders engage with changes in higher education by pursuing trust. Cilliers and May (2010) explained that trust is necessary for an organisation to function. Accordingly, student leaders referred to the need for safe spaces consisting of an environment of trust as a valuable component of the conversation about the anxiety of working with diversity dynamics.

In the absence of experiencing safe spaces and trust, student leaders employ facelessness to navigate the overwhelming student leadership task of the transformation role. However, if facelessness is the unconscious denial of working with transformation, then acknowledging the gains made in South African transformation (Bazana & Mogotsi 2017) may detract from their importance as student leaders responsible for transformation. During the social dream drawing, students stated: We are leaders without a cause. This suggests that their leadership task is something that they cannot always

define. Simultaneously, their denial of the already attained gains of transformation can represent a denial of their newly acquired identity as a collective higher education entity (Albertus 2019). This implies there have been gains toward transformation in higher education, and that student leaders appear to be going through a process of finding, or settling, their identity in the context of these transformation advancements already made. Therefore, it becomes important to actively engage with them as significant mediators between university management and fellow students – their newly acquired identity within the context of transformation – to foster this integration.

Emotional labour in student leadership: The leadership role induces depression-like episodes

Indications about emotional labour in student leadership emerged during data collection debriefing. Additionally, during member checks, we noted that one of the participants had been admitted to hospital resulting from pressures experienced, exacerbated by the student leadership role. Furthermore, the stillborn metaphor which represents an expectation or pregnancy that did not realise, highlights the emotional labour in student leadership. This labour heightens student leadership identity issues in the face of loss (i.e. in loss of return on their effort) (Lichtenthal & Breitbart 2016). In turn, this could then explain the centrality of identity in the conversation about anxiety in working with diversity dynamics in higher education where loss is represented by a sense of an unmet expectation (Campos, Besser & Blatt 2011).

According to seminal psychodynamic descriptions (Ribeiro, Ribeiro & Von Doellinger 2018), depressive states can represent disappointment or loss of an ideal, to which one responds with either a mourning effect, or melancholy. Such effects are indicated by reactions to the loss of a desired outcome, or to an unconscious process that is characterised by a significant decline in self-esteem (Klein 1960), visible through narcissistic introjections, guilt and helplessness (Campos et al. 2011). Therefore, the stillborn image becomes linked to narcissistic injury (Pule 2017); damage to the ego (Kohut 2004) in the sense of leadership identity and the unfruitful outcomes of the role. As with Ribeiro et al. (2018), Campos et al. (2011) and Kohut (2004), the emotional labour of student leadership is experienced as depression-like episodes (Klein 1960). To aid the transformation role, we therefore conceptualise the emotional labour of their leadership within the appropriate Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) V boundaries, but also take a psychodynamic view thereof (Pule, in press). This may help to attend to their emotional labour in a manner which supportively highlights the unique experience of their transformation role.

Additionally, these depression states could suggest that student leaders are required to take on a task that is bigger than they are reasonably capable of doing. The combination of their current stage of life, the magnitude of their responsibility as per the Higher Education Act, and the

ensuing identity dilemma including the expectation to rise above obstacles and challenges facing student leadership, may be too vast. Accordingly, these experiences may contribute to the depression-like episodes (Klein 1960) associated with such leadership. Therefore, the task of student leadership may blur the reasonable task of completing a degree and growing as an aspiring leader.

Support for organisational effectiveness: Student leaders require unique support from the university, particularly psychological support

Given the student leaders' emotional labour, psychotherapeutic/psychological support should be used more than it currently is to enhance organisational effectiveness (Lowman 2002, 2016). This psychological support should focus on the depression-like episodes that these leaders may experience during their term of office (Bowman & Payne 2011) and proactively equip student leaders with tools to engage with the emotional labour experienced (Avery 2004). Options of support could help student leaders to hold matters in perspective especially to remain aware that their studies are a priority alongside their role as student leader. Subsequently, this enhances their confidence in setting appropriate boundaries and delegation of responsibilities instead of unnecessarily assuming an overwhelming burden (Mortensen & Haas 2016; Trefalt 2013).

A systemic and multi-levelled co-curriculum for student leadership development as a way forward

A multi-levelled (Culp & Dungey 2012; Evans et al. 2010; Keeling 2004, 2006) and systemic co-curriculum for student leadership development is proposed. This proposal serves to intervene socio-analytically (Long 2013) on individual, group and organisational levels (Lowman 2016). The proposal addressed the apparent fragmented student leadership (Getz & Roy 2013; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014; Mukoza & Goodman 2013), the *blurry* context and student leaders desiring a common vision. This therefore integrates and streamlines the effort of student leaders in their transformation role. The intervention would be based on viewing student leadership as comprising the student leader as an individual system (Agazarian 2012), the group system (Agazarian 2012) (i.e. SRCs and their subcommittees, including student leaders within leadership development programs and activists), and the organisation level which indicates student leadership comprehensively (Long 2013).

The intervention is proposed as follows:

- On individual level, provide opportunity for training (Herbst & Maree 2008; eds. Kouzes & Posner 2014), coaching (Keeling 2004; Page, Loots & Du Toit 2005) and counselling interventions (Bowman & Payne 2011) linked to proposition 5.
- On group level, interventions could contribute to interpersonal relations development by including in the programme role analysis and renegotiation, the

clarification of identity within group/s, and intergroup relations (Lowman 2016). Furthermore, regarding working with diversity, the intervention could attend to unconscious dynamics and processes within individuals, in relation to others, within groups and between groups (Lowman 2016). As representatives of the various groups to which the student leaders are affiliated, the intervention could focus on the manner in which individuals apply the aforementioned processes (in order to facilitate working with diversity) (Lowman 2002).

- Organisationally, interventions could foster leadership behaviour development, that is, interpersonal relations and psychosocial challenges in student leadership, including working with diversity dynamics (Lowman 2002). It denotes exploring the emotional management involved in student leadership and the adjustment and change required in (South African) universities. Furthermore, student leaders could be enabled to work effectively with diversity within the diverse organisations and systems where their leadership is being exercised.

Conclusion

Various current understandings and definitions of student leadership have been noted. Through a social dream drawing research with student leaders, it has been found that student leadership is constructed through the interaction of student leadership identity with relational dynamics. Student leadership identity constitutes an identity crisis, between an identity as leaders versus identity as student. Both positions are held in tension by a defended identity, from which a conversation about the anxiety of working with diversity dynamics was inspired. Student leaders raised their need for support, particularly regarding their transformation role. This research led to the expression of six propositions from which positive benefits for the transformation role that student leaders can play in higher education in South Africa were envisioned. The propositions have implications for student leadership practice and legislation. Additionally, the propositions hold implications for enhanced student affairs practice that is anchored by a multi-levelled, systemic student leadership intervention within the transformation agenda. This intervention focuses on student leadership development, psychological impact, mental health, and student leadership competency. Simultaneously, these implications could also extend to those whom the universities mandate to work with leaders.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

N.T.P. conceptualised and wrote the original draft of the manuscript. She conducted the formal analysis as well as the project administration. N.T.P. is responsible for conceptualising and implementing the methodology in terms of the research conducted as well as the approach to writing the manuscript. She has also been involved in the reviewing and editing of the document.

M.M. acted as a supervisor for the project on which the manuscript is based. Pertaining the manuscript in particular, she has given advice on the methodology used to approach the writing of the manuscripts and has also been involved in the reviewing and editing of the document.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, N.T.P. The data are not publicly available because of the personal nature of the drawings and their containing information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official statement policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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