

BRIDGING THE GAP: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A CATALYST FOR UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

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Community-university engagements are pivotal for addressing societal challenges and cultivating mutual learning and collaboration. Advocating for community engagement as a central strategic element of institutional identity could either align with or differ from community perceptions and expectations, thus potentially leading to disagreements. Embedded within a community-based participatory research approach to community engagement, this study aimed to explore community members' perceptions of what community engagement constitutes, the value they place on this type of interaction, and their expectations from community-university engagements and partnerships. Drawing on a thematic qualitative analysis from four focus group discussions across two communities, the findings highlight that co-construction of knowledge is central to university-community engagement. To bridge the community-expert epistemic gap, academics must adopt epistemic humility and become unbiased, reflexive listeners respecting and valuing community knowledge. This approach is vital for co-creating solutions that address existing local issues and achieving sustainable, long-term outcomes. The findings offer a pathway for universities to transcend traditional academic silos and urban privilege, facilitating more equitable community-university engagement.

Keywords: Community engagement, participation, university-community partnerships, epistemic justice

1. Introduction

As evidenced by increasing trends towards commercialisation and commodification within higher education, universities operate within a framework shaped by global capitalism, emphasising market-driven strategies (Geiger & Heller, 2011; Preece, 2017). This emphasis on financial profit, research outputs, publications, and rankings often eclipses their societal contribution and social mission. The Council on Higher Education (2000) underscores the repercussions and potential risks associated with a higher education system propelled by detrimental competition. They highlight that an overemphasis on marketisation and commodification may divert attention from important social objectives. Therefore, while the primary roles of higher education institutions (HEI) have historically revolved around research

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and innovation, as well as teaching and training, a third vital aspect is their contribution to community building and transformation (Jacob et al., 2015; Mtawa et al., 2016). Community engagement (CE) essentially materialised to address the disconnected ivory tower HEI approach to communities they were envisioned to serve (Butterfield & Soska, 2004; Nyanzi et al., 2021).

Consequently, the mid-20th century witnessed an upsurge in governments encouraging HEIs to desist from detaching themselves from societal needs and rather serve as crucial vehicles in addressing the common local societal challenges (Nyanzi et al., 2021). In line with this global HEI agenda, several South African policy documents formalised the importance of CE as an essential aspect of higher education in the country. The National Commission on Higher Education's (NCHE) 1996 report underscores the imperative for HEIs to enhance their responsiveness to the socio-economic needs of local communities as a vital step towards transformation. It suggests that HEIs must tackle local issues and challenges, while integrating the perspectives and values of historically marginalised groups (NCHE, 1996).

The Education White Paper 3 of 1997 reinforces this by emphasising the importance of CE to meet broader objectives (Department of Education [DoE], 1997). The White Paper 3 emphasises the imperative for universities to be responsive to societal interests and needs, contribute to community building and transformation, support human capacity building, and involve community stakeholders in equitable knowledge production and decision-making (DoE, 1997). CE has been defined as structured, beneficial, interactive, and reciprocally collaborative relationships between HEIs and local communities that enhance learning, teaching, and research, while concurrently addressing societal challenges and concerns (Centre for Higher Education Transformation [CHET], 2003). True CE should thus be an integral part of HEIs' core functions and comprise socially responsive research and collaborative equitable community-university partnerships to ensure community building and transformation.

Despite these imperatives, HEIs vary significantly in their level of CE, with some having more robust connections than others (Jacob et al., 2015; Weerts et al., 2014). For some universities, CE remains a "tick-box" activity restricted to community outreach and not true engagement. Essentially, outreach is a one-way outreach by universities to the communities they serve and comprises transferring knowledge and skills from the university to community members (Byrne, 2019). To adhere to policy imperatives, HEIs conventionally assumed an approach focused on reaching out to communities and/or their stakeholders in a top-down, unbalanced, one-sided expert knowledge delivery model (Mulu-Mutuka et al., 2017; Nyanzi et al., 2021). Even within universities, variations exist where certain units, institutions, or academic departments are deeply involved and engaged with communities, while others show less engagement or are disengaged (Weerts et al., 2014).

Although Preece (2017, p.7) contends that there has been a notable recent shift away from fragmented, sporadic, short-term outreach initiatives dictated from above, towards embracing "a social justice agenda for community engagement" as a core focus for universities, Mulu-Mutuka et al. (2017) and others (see Jinkins & Cecil, 2015) highlight that CE continues to be restricted to outreach activities. One implication for CE as an outreach activity is that academic staff provide services to the community as recipients, rather than engaging in a constructive exchange with community participants (Dube & Hendricks, 2023). The diverse interpretations of CE contributed to this dilemma, resulting in universities struggling to clearly convey what is regarded as true "engaged practice" and being questioned about their contribution to the public good (Goddard & Kempton, 2016; Mtawa et al., 2016).

Advocating for engagement as a fundamental aspect of institutional identity could, as argued by Weerts et al. (2014), either align to or diverge from stakeholders' perceptions, depending on their initial interaction with the institution. Consequently, Weerts et al. (2014) underscore the importance of research that examines the alignment between organisational identity in higher education and the perceptions held by external stakeholders. It is thus important to explore community perceptions and expectations about CE to ensure meaningful and successful engagement, and to avoid potential misunderstandings or disputes (Checkoway, 2011). A rapid scan of the literature revealed that CE is typically defined from a top-down perspective, reflecting institutional expectations and objectives of the engagement initiatives, as well as academic views, definitions, and descriptions of CE. As argued by Nanyanzi et al. (2021), current research reveals a large body of academic literature that theoretically defines both the concept and practice of CE, but there is a deafening silence on community members' and stakeholders' views and needs for CE, even though their perceptions and needs are regarded as vital to CE. In this regard, Checkoway (2011) warns that non-alignment with the community's particular understanding and expectations can hamper CE activities.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore community members' perceptions of what CE constitutes, the value they place on these interactions, and their expectations from community-university engagements and partnerships. By understanding community members' perceptions, the study sought to identify key aspects that can enhance effective and meaningful CE, tailored to local communities' specific needs and expectations. Community members' perceptions of what constitutes CE and their expectations from the engagement process are crucial for aligning community needs with university objectives. This alignment is essential for the success of community-university partnerships and initiatives.

2. Theoretical framework

The study was guided by a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) lens. Advocates of CBPAR emphasise that it is fundamentally a philosophical and ethical approach to research rather than a strict methodology (Sylvestre et al., 2018). Several studies have demonstrated that CBPAR is among the most frequently used frameworks for engaging disadvantaged communities (Riccardi et al., 2023). The core of CE revolves around enhancing community participation, fostering collaboration, and amplifying community voices to achieve more impactful outcomes (Taliep, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). CBPAR enables universities to move beyond traditional academic silos and urban privilege, bridge the gap between universities and communities, and foster equitable community-university collaboration. This inclusive, collaborative, participatory approach foregrounds CE by ensuring the equitable involvement of community representatives, including community members, leaders, stakeholders, and service providers (Taliep et al., 2022a). CBPAR is important to ensure participation, but participation alone is insufficient in engaging communities, as it does not eliminate inequities in power and resources (Riccardi et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The aim of the current paper was to explore the perceptions and experiences of community partners related to their understandings of community-university engagements, particularly through our CE activities from 2011 to 2022 in Johannesburg and Cape Town. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of community views on CE, we used a multiple-case study qualitative design with two cases (communities) as a unit in real-life settings. Since qualitative research allows the researcher to explore experiences, perspectives, and meaning in detail and from the participants' point of view (Hammarberg et al., 2016), a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable. The goal of a case study is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the context of a particular case or cases (Tomaszewski et al., 2020), which allowed us to explore the perceptions and experiences of community partners across two communities in the context of their community-university engagements, especially as key participants in our CE activities for the past decade. Multiple-case evidence is usually more robust and reliable than single-case research (Heale & Twycross, 2018).

3.2 *Research context, sampling, and participants*

The research context spanned across two South African communities, where the core of our CE activities was embedded. One community was located in Johannesburg (Community JHB), and the other community in Cape Town (Community CT). Community JHB was located in the South of Johannesburg, Gauteng. The only available population estimates data for this community indicated that the community consisted of nearly 21 000 people and around 9 000 households (Frith, 2011). Residents of Community JHB resided in informal housing, which were primarily constructed of corrugated iron. This community faced a number of structural challenges, including inadequate water and sanitation services, electricity, and housing (Seedat et al., 2017). The community also experienced high levels of unemployment and crime.

Community CT was located within the Strand area of the Helderberg region, Western Cape. This community comprised approximately 250 households and almost twice as many backyard dwellings, and also faced numerous structural issues such as inadequate infrastructure like a lack of lighting, dilapidated streets, and a lack of recreational spaces (Omarjee et al., 2023; Taliep et al., 2022b). Like Community JHB, many of the residents within this community were unemployed, and the community further experienced high levels of crime and violence.

Our institute has had long-standing relationships with both communities. With regard to Community JHB, the institute has been working with this community since the early 1980s (Seedat et al., 2017). In Community CT, the institute and the community have also been in partnership for over a decade, with a core group of community researchers serving as representatives and liaison structures between the community and the institute (Louw et al., 2020; Taliep et al., 2022b). The research and CE activities within these communities have primarily been guided by the values and principles of the Ukuphepha Transformational Model of Community Engagement, which aligns with the values and principles of CBPAR such as ensuring epistemic justice, community building and transformation, collaborative partnerships, co-learning and co-creation of knowledge, among others (Taliép, 2023).

To select participants from the two participating communities, purposive sampling was employed. Selection and recruitment of participants commenced with the process of exposure mapping, where, through document analysis, a retrospective overview was provided in relation to community members' exposure to various phases and activities of the

Ukuphepha Transformational Model of Community Engagement. During this process, documents (registers, agendas, meeting minutes, etc.) of CE activities from 2011 to 2022 were analysed from both communities to record the names and particulars of community members who have participated in CE activities such as workshops/trainings, community meetings, data collection activities, programmes initiated through research projects, or community forum/coalition activities. The available information was collated into an Excel spreadsheet, and participants, with the assistance of community partners, were then selected and recruited from this database.

As we were interested in exploring the perceptions of community partners and their understanding of community-university engagements, this database allowed us to identify relevant stakeholders, community members, and leaders who would be able to provide insight into CE activities during the set period. Furthermore, to participate, participants had to be older than 18, heterogeneous in relation to gender and had to have been part of the CE activities for the stipulated period. A total of four FGDs were conducted across the two communities. The number of participants who participated in the FGDs across the two respective communities and their genders are presented in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1 Participant information

Community FGD	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Other</i>
Community JHB (FGD 1)	6	4	2	
Community JHB (FGD 2)	13	11	2	
Community CT (FGD 3)	14	1	13	
Community CT (FGD 4)	13	4	8	1
Total	46	20	25	1

As can be seen from the participant demographic information presented in Table 1, a total of 46 individuals participated across Johannesburg (n=19) and Cape Town (n=27). In Community JHB, the majority of participants across the two FGDs were male (n=15), whereas only 4 participants were female. Conversely, in Community CT, the majority of the participants were female (n=21), whereas only five identified as male, and one as other. So, across the two FGDs, a total of 20 males, 25 females, and one other gendered person participated in the study.

3.3 Data collection method and procedure

As mentioned earlier, to elicit responses from participants, a total of four FGDs were conducted (two in Community JHB and two in Community CT). The FGD interview schedule consisted of semi-structured questions, with questions focusing on exploring participants' experiences and understanding of the community-university engagements pursued through the various CE activities that took place within the two respective communities. The two FGDs in Community JHB were conducted at our Johannesburg office, and the two FGDs in Community CT were conducted at two central venues in the participating community. In line with a community-based participatory approach, community partners also assisted with identifying and recruiting suitable participants and arranged suitable venues within the community. Prior to commencing with the FGDs, information sheets were administered and explained to participants, where each participant was then requested to sign a consent form

to confirm their participation in the study. All four FGDs were audio-recorded and transcribed and were approximately 90 to 123 minutes in duration.

3.4 Data analysis

The qualitative data generated from the four FGDs drew on the thematic data analysis technique outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012). The first step was for the research team to read, review, and become familiar with the transcripts, as well as to generate initial ideas for the coding process. The next step was to code the data before organising the different codes into themes that spoke to the aim and objectives of the study. These themes subsequently had to be reviewed and refined. Moreover, in order to complete the steps outlined above, the authors of this paper conducted and engaged in a series of data analysis workshops where they independently analysed the transcripts. The team then convened and had discussions regarding pertinent themes that emerged.

3.5 Reflexivity

Our research team consisted of three females, who would politically be constructed as “coloured”¹. While being able to resonate with some elements of the Cape Town community, who are also considered to be predominantly coloured, it is important to acknowledge that we hold privileges that many of our community counterparts may not. This includes completing higher education qualifications (two doctoral degrees and one master's degree) and residing in communities where some of the socio-economic challenges faced in our partnering communities, although present, are not as rampant (e.g. poverty, unemployment, and high levels of violence). These privileges may create a dynamic where we as researchers are seen as the “experts”, or the ones who hold all the power in the university-community partnership. We were therefore consciously mindful of any power imbalances that may arise unintentionally, and to adhere to the principles of epistemic justice, and remain co-creators and co-owners of research endeavours within the community, as advocated for in community-engaged research.

Furthermore, due to the longstanding relationship within our partnering communities, we acknowledge that we may hold certain assumptions about our engagement activities with community partners, and it has thus been important to remain cognisant of these assumptions and expectations so as not to interfere with our partners’ true evaluation of our CE activities, or our dynamics within the partnership. Attempts to address these assumptions were made through peer debriefing sessions among the team, and ongoing self-critical reflection.

3.6 Ethics

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the institution’s ethics committee. The guidelines set out by this committee were observed during the course of this study. The aim and objectives of the study were explained to participants prior to the start of the FGDs, and

¹ Historically, racial categories (such as black, white, coloured and Indian) have been used to categorise and discriminate against certain groups within South Africa. These categories, however, are still used in the present day to refer to people within the country. We therefore make use of these categories solely for the purposes of this research paper and recognise the history associated with these racial groups.

an information sheet was given to each participant outlining the purpose, possible risks, and benefits of the study, and how anonymity and confidentiality would be ensured. Signed informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were further informed of their voluntary participation in the study and that they were at liberty to withdraw from the study at any stage with no repercussions.

4. Findings and discussion

Community members' understanding and expectations of CE are presented under the following themes: (1) CE is an ideal way of working with communities, (2) Community should be the central point of convergence, (3) Ensuring optimal, inclusive participation, (4) Cultivating equitable, collaborative partnerships, (5) Knowledge politics, epistemic justice and community voice, (6) Humanising engagements: Building relationships of respect and trust, and (7) Continuity: Sustainable community engagement.

4.1 *CE is an ideal way of working with communities*

CE facilitates a way of conducting research that allows academics to bridge the university-community divide. Any effort to address societal problems requires innovative approaches to knowledge production, which typically involves collaborative processes such as partnerships, knowledge exchange, and co-creation of solutions (Fitzgerald et al., 2019), all of which are central to CE. Community members highlighted the value and importance of this approach, stating:

I think that the community engagement is an ideal approach in the sense that it affords the community, our constituency, an opportunity to ask questions and give inputs where necessary, so based on that, I will say it is an ideal approach. (FGD 2: JHB, MP)

It is ideal to work with community organisations because you are able to find out at grassroots level that, how is the community feeling about certain issues that affect them? And you also understand where it is, that whether it is the government or whoever is in charge, how are they participating towards the needs of the community. Are they making sure that the community is well taken care of, or they are lacking somewhere somehow? In doing so, you are able to measure the standard or the service delivery you are giving towards the people. (FGD 2: JHB, FP)

I think to work with the community is best because now, before you implement any programme or any project, the programme or projects even government is doing in the community, when you come with the programme that [the] community does not know, then you are causing havoc within. It might fail, so it is best to engage with the community before you do anything even the research, engage with the community then the community will understand why you are doing those things. Thank you. (FGD 2: JHB, MP)

The preceding quotations reveal that participants regarded CE as an ideal approach to the community, as it creates opportunities for community members and stakeholders at the grassroots level to be centrally involved in addressing community concerns, which ultimately can prevent misunderstandings and the failure of projects. The sentiment of early community involvement is shared by others, such as De Weger et al. (2018) and Han et al. (2021), who

highlight the importance of engaging citizens in processes regarding their own healthcare priorities.

Ultimately, CE is used extensively globally as an approach for addressing socio-economic challenges, enhancing people's livelihoods and promoting sustainability (Brahim, 2024; Karki, 2024). It is therefore necessary for community members and stakeholders who are impacted by and experience these socio-economic challenges as part of their daily lived realities to be included in decision-making processes and solution-based discussions, for effective, positive and sustainable outcomes. Thus, strengthening community resilience and enhancing the overall impact of development and prevention initiatives.

4.2 Community should be the central point of convergence

"Community as the central point of convergence" suggests that the primary emphasis or focal point should be on the community. This theme highlights the importance of recognising and giving full attention to the community and their lived realities as the central focus of the engagement activities. This includes foregrounding community needs and views and focusing engagement efforts on what really matters to the community. This is explicated in the following excerpts:

The community is recognised from the start, but even before any projects are started, the community provides input in all planning, interaction, and implementation. (FGD 3: CT, MP)

Community engagement is where we are talking or rather where we put the situation in the way it is in the community, or talking about the challenges that are there to see how or what is affecting them [i.e. the community] and what the solution is, just that we should engage in talks and consult each other. (FGD 1: JHB, MP)

[Community engagement means] acknowledging the community and whatever is being planned or if there is an intervention, if there is a need to approach the community or do something in the community, acknowledge [i.e. recognise] the community, *follow protocols* (emphasis added) ... (FGD 3: CT, FP)

In a debunking of helicopter approaches to CE, community members express their concerns about how top-down strategies often overlook local context and fail to address the real needs and perspectives of those directly affected. At the same time, participants counsel researchers or HEIs who engage with them to comply with engagement and communication protocols or the expected code of behaviour. As academics, we are ethically bound to abide by engagement protocols, including being responsive to community needs, upholding values of respect for diversity and dignity, and so on. Hardy and Fortner (2021) emphasise that CE frameworks that focus on equity will speak to the needs, challenges, experiences, values, norms, and viewpoints of communities.

When community is the central focus of the engagement, it ensures that the challenges and issues the community faces are foregrounded, and contextually relevant solutions are pursued. Accordingly, one participant noted that community engagement encompasses "organising the community to address [community] issues/interests that members find important" (FGD 3: CT, FP). This not only highlights the importance of aligning research with community needs, but also emphasises "organising", bringing the community together to address their needs and identifying relevant solutions. The following quote corroborates and further expands this view:

This community engagement is to consult community at the grassroots ... about their concerns and their needs, actually it is to make sure that community is helped by those who are leading the community or maybe those who are governing or those who can bring up a solution to the problems of the community. (FGD 2: JHB, MP)

This excerpt highlights that the solutions lie with the community, various stakeholders and community leaders, and the collective identification of solutions. Their local knowledge and lived experiences provide invaluable insights that are crucial for crafting effective and sustainable strategies tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the communities being engaged. Thus, emphasising the importance of achieving successful collaboration with a community, McCloskey et al. (2011) note that everyone involved should endeavour to understand the viewpoints of “insiders”, which are the community members and stakeholders, and whether they represent a locality, religious institution, local organisation, health practice or service, or public health agency. This approach ensures that interventions and solutions are grounded in the real experiences and needs of those directly affected. Valuing and integrating these diverse perspectives make it possible to develop culturally relevant strategies, effectively addressing local issues and harnessing community strengths; thus, cultivating trust, enhancing collaboration, and increasing the opportunities for success by aligning efforts with the community's context and priorities.

4.3 Ensuring optimal inclusive participation

Optimal and inclusive participation involves engagement processes where community members and stakeholders are centrally and meaningfully involved in decision-making, planning, and implementation of activities, programmes, and policies that directly affect their lives. To safeguard the communities' power to act in their own best interest, it is imperative that they actively participate in the decision-making process (Riccardi et al., 2023). Without the community having decision-making power, CE can be tantamount to tokenistic exchanges. As alluded to in the ensuing excerpt, community members highlighted the importance of their central involvement and active participation in decision-making on issues that are pivotal to their lives:

The way I understand it is [that] community engagement, it will be community involvement, participation of community... [for] example if there are talks about ... development, you can't just be on the side and just listen while being fed that information. It is for you as a community member to be part of the process of that thing, so it's participation the way I understand it. (FGD 1: JHB, MP)

Okay, in my own understanding, the community engagement it is like coming up with a project or like, just as you have called us here, you want us to engage on what is written on the paper or maybe going to the community and loud hailing calling the community and telling the community that we are going to sell Tupperware [for example]. In a community, you need the input of the community as a whole about how they feel about us bringing Tupperware in the community. That is engaging, we are all engaging about what is being brought [into] the community. (FGD 1: JHB, FP)

Other participants also noted that it is “Immersion in the community” (FGD 4: CT, FP) and that participation is “to become involved, visibly involved” (FGD 4: CT, FP). These excerpts illustrate and allude to the hands-on nature of participation as a core tenet of CE, emphasising that CE is not a top-down one-way process, but an active participatory process. Another

participant emphasised that participation signifies that community members are active contributors in the knowledge-making and research process.

It is partaking through like it is interacting. It is like if there is a project and then you partake like contribution, the time you have contributed to the project, it is like engaging on that project. For example, like we are here, isn't it, it is part of collaboration by contributing ourselves and like having a connection and communication... I think it is part of engagement. (FGD 1: JHB, MP)

This quotation suggests that optimal participation is not passive or merely symbolic but involves an action imperative for participants, where the participatory engagement itself constitutes an action that can bring about change or transformation. In other words, participants view engagement as a reciprocal relationship that is built upon connection, collaboration, and communication. This implies that mutual investment and the collaborative nature of engagement will foster shared ownership of initiatives.

Concerning inclusive participation, researchers often face the dilemma of “who should be involved” from the community. Quick and Bryson (2016) regard who participates and who does not participate as extremely consequential for establishing which people and whose interests are considered in decision-making. This is particularly problematic when entering a community for the first time, even if you compiled a community profile or gained access via a gatekeeper, which is helpful to begin with. However, these do not entirely solve your dilemma. Researchers may be unaware of underlying community issues and relational challenges. As demonstrated in the ensuing quote, to obtain an adequate representation of the community, it is essential to involve a diverse sector of the community, including community members, service providers (even those outside of the community who provide services to the community), community leaders, and interest groups, as well as ensuring diversity.

People belong to many different churches. There are different churches that people belong to [like] the Old Apostolic, New Apostolic, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal ... and four different mosques ... It is to recognise the diversity in the community... So, there are different entities in the community. It is to acknowledge these institutes that the people in [name of community] belong. That formulates and is part of their identity. It is about being inclusive. (FGD 3: CT, MP).

[This should include] individuals, groups and organisations that are known in the community (FGD 3: CT, FP)

With respect to achieving the principle of participation, it is thus important to be as inclusive as possible when engaging with communities. Hardy and Fortner (2021) emphasise the importance of equitable participation, noting that failure to intentionally incorporate local socio-cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity will further perpetuate inequities. Therefore, these authors recommend researchers/academics to purposefully identify the existing racial, cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic diversity within a community and ensure equitable representation that aligns with local values, norms, and preferences. Importantly, what is missing from Hardy and Fortner's (2021) recommendation, is ensuring equitable gender and age representation, which is crucial for the representativeness of diverse perspectives and needs of the entire community and ensuring that interventions are inclusive and effective for everyone.

4.4 Cultivating inclusive, equitable collaborative partnerships

A large body of evidence foregrounds the necessity for equitable, principled, and authentic community-university research partnerships (Bhawra et al., 2022; Dewaele et al., 2022; Sylvestre et al., 2018).

I think it, [i.e. community engagement] is interaction between the community and ... the university of the research study. There are talks about collaboration, so naturally they build a relationship. So, I will say it is the interaction of a relationship that is built between the community and the university or research institution... (FGD 3: CT, MP)

This participant thus regarded effective communication, interactive relations, cooperation and collaboration as central to building collaborative partnerships. Partnerships that are collaborative are recognised as central to CE and, as alluded to in the ensuing quotes and other literature (Dewaele et al., 2022; Kliewer, 2014), a partnership involves core values, such as reciprocity, trust, respect, and fairness, which are central to the process of collaboration.

Uhm, yes, so, community involvement is necessary ... to have a partnership. So, we have already mentioned some of the aspects; the trust, the respect that goes with community participation so there must be community involvement ... we are partners. (FGD 4: CT, FP)

Sylvestre et al. (2018) argue that involving community representatives as equal partners in the research process enhances the relevance and impact of both the process and the outcomes, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving lasting and meaningful change. A key question in this respect is, “How can HEIs ensure that they loosen their grip on the politics entangled in knowledge production?” (see Ramaley, 2019). A partnership that is characterised by inclusivity, and equity includes the excluded, foregrounds the voices of the unheard, and values all knowledges and worldviews, all of which are central elements to cultivating an equitable, sustainable, socially just collaborative community-university partnership (Ramaley, 2019; Reed, 2015). Inclusivity and equity are not just ideals, but essential practices for creating meaningful, transformative change in community-university partnerships.

4.5 Knowledge politics, epistemic justice and community voice

Any effort to address societal problems requires innovative approaches to knowledge production, which typically involve collaborative processes such as partnerships, knowledge exchange, and co-creation of solutions (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Ramaley (2019) highlights the crucial role of community voice in attaining both equity and social justice. They further argue that knowledge inclusivity should span all phases of CE and include community ways of knowing, leveraging the voices and experiences of underrepresented, marginalised, and disadvantaged community members to ensure that communities actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. In this framework, inclusivity refers to a more holistic and comprehensive endeavour, as it recognises the importance of drawing from a wide range of experiences and insights. In this regard, one participant noted that to engage the community is “to ensure that the community provides input in all planning and interactions” (FGD 3: CT, MP). Since the ability to contribute knowledge is fundamental to human worth, epistemic injustice, such as when “someone is wronged in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker, 2013, p. 1317), underpins other types of social injustice (Fricker, 2007; Newbigging & Ridley, 2018). From the community members’ point of view, and as demonstrated in the following excerpt, epistemic justice is a vital component of CE:

For me, it [i.e. community engagement] is to have ideas to share ideas, eh, because I feel that as a community, we are the experts of our living conditions, we know better than someone who is coming from outside. So that person who is coming from outside, coming to [community name], I think he needs the experts such as the residents of [community name] so that when they engage with us, the person who will be benefitting more will be the one who will be getting ideas and the expertise within the community in which they will be engaging. (FGD 1: JHB, MP)

This quote demonstrates that knowledge construction is central to CE. However, this production of knowledge must embrace communities as experts of their own lived realities and as producers of knowledge from whom “outsiders” can learn and benefit. Every community has their own distinct culture and identity, making the community members the true experts on their own histories, main concerns, and transformation (Bhawra et al., 2022). For outsiders, it is thus important to bridge the epistemic boundary between community knowledge and academic “expert” knowledge (see Liabo et al., 2022) by respecting the value and validity of community knowledge, recognising that local insights are crucial for understanding community-specific issues and dynamics.

When considering the significant value of community voice and experience in CE, Fricker's (2013) concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are particularly relevant. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unethically devalued because of prejudiced appraisal on the part of the listener (Fricker, 2013). In the academy, knowledge is practiced in a social hierarchy (Liabo et al., 2022). Fricker (2007) maintains that people operate “as social types who stand in relations of power to one another” (p. 3). Researcher-community relationships are, to a degree, inevitably shaped by the power structures that generally position academics as experts and community members as non-experts, participants, or subjects (Palmer et al., 2020). Thus, testimonial injustice occurs when community members', leaders', and stakeholders' voices and experiences are dismissed or undervalued by researchers or HEIs. Hermeneutical injustice refers to a cognitive gap or a lack of collective conceptual resources in comprehension that influences particular groups when trying to make sense of social experiences (Fricker, 2013; Newbigging & Ridley, 2018). This is shaped by prevailing social values and norms that privilege certain types of knowledge (Newbigging & Ridley, 2018).

CE, through its aim to achieve epistemic and social justice, envisions the levelling of this power imbalance by ensuring that all worldviews are valued, community voices are foregrounded and respected, and community members feel acknowledged and genuinely heard (Taliep, 2022). This is particularly achieved through the principles of reciprocity, co-learning and the co-creation of knowledge to collectively explore novel ideas and solutions, identifying and drawing on community strengths and resources to address existing identified community challenges (Taliep et al., 2023). The ensuing quotes substantiate this line of reasoning:

Alright, yes, for me, I think that the community engagement is an ideal approach in the sense that it affords the community our constituency and opportunity to ask questions and give inputs where necessary, so, based on that, I will say it is an ideal approach. (FGD 2: JHB, MP)

... I believe this [i.e. community engagement] is [an] ideal plan to run things like that because you become whatever you are making decisions on, you are including also community because you see sometimes if you base your decision in leadership, you leave many people behind, because on the ground, there are many people who are very

wise than the leaders there on top and these people are not heard and this is giving the leaders that monopoly of saying that without me or with me South Africa is progressing... If we are saying that we are including the grassroots, there are very wise people in the grassroots who are silent and who have never been heard or maybe given an opportunity, the system has never given them an opportunity to show themselves that they can contribute in the development of the country. (FGD 2: JHB, MP)

These views emphasise the importance of addressing epistemic injustice in CE initiatives by ensuring that community members are active and equal partners in the research process, with their contributions being given due weight and recognition. Therefore, to address epistemic injustice, the engaged scholar, student, or HEI must adopt what Newbigging and Ridley (2018, p.37) call “epistemic humility” and become attentive listeners. Epistemic humility is regarded as an intellectual virtue that is rooted in the awareness that our knowledge is by nature transitory and incomplete and may require revision when new evidence comes to light (Angner, 2020). This definition suggests that scholars or practitioners engage with communities not as possessors of all knowledge, but as learners who can gain knowledge from community members. It further highlights ethical concerns implicated in the knowledge production process. Whilst knowledge construction provides scholars with considerable freedom, it does not occur in isolation; it has consequences and implications (Code, 1991). Since ethics are fundamentally concerned about how to be good and how to act (Code, 1991) in the best interest of the participants, the engaged scholar must be guided by imperatives of responsibility, accountability, and ethics of care. Epistemic humility involves developing a better awareness of possible epistemic injustices by being anti-prejudicial, reflexive, virtuous listeners who actively work to amplify the voices of the marginalised and their agency to influence understanding (Fricker, 2017; Newbigging & Ridley, 2018) and social transformation. Listening involves both moral and knowledge-based aspects and, so, true listening can only occur when one becomes fully immersed in the engagement process and listens with understanding.

4.6 Humanising engagements: Building relationships of respect and trust

Building relationships is central to CE, as it serves as the foundation for collaboration with the community. Unlike traditional outreach methods, CE demands significant dedication (and time) to cultivating long-lasting community-academy relationships (Nanyanzi et al., 2021). The following excerpt from one of the participants alludes to the importance of building relationships as a central aspect of CE:

I think that it [i.e. community engagement] is interaction between the community and ... the university or the research institute. And it is the fact that there are talks about collaboration, so, naturally, they build a relationship. So, I will say that it is the interactive relations involved in building of a relationships between the community and the university or research institution. (FGD 3: CT, MP)

For a community-university collaborative relationship to succeed and flourish, trust is therefore an essential foundational requirement (Hardy & Fortner, 2021; Hurd & Stanton, 2022). Building trust and credibility is important for building strong institutional-community relationships and pursuing collaborative endeavours. Findings from a study by Sylvestre et al. (2018) support the importance of ensuring that sufficient time is built into the research process to form and strengthen relationships that are meaningful and respectful, as this

served as the foundation for building the necessary trust for their subsequent engagement. In this regard, community members highlighted the importance of building trust in engagements that require universities to work closely together with communities:

[To win the trust of the community] start by building relationships in that community so that you become known to the community, so that people can trust you. Trust is not built overnight; it comes with time; so that which you say must be proven. So, people will measure your actions to determine whether your words can be proven. So, I will say, at the end of the day, that your reputation is of utmost importance. (FGD 3: CT, FP)

[When] you come from the outside and enter the community ... it is important that you don't just come in and make promises, because that won't work for the community. It is about building trust ... because people's trust is often broken by outsiders who make promises but do not deliver on their promises. So, it is about building a relationship, and basically to keep that promise, so that we can work together for many years and not just *come in and disappear* (emphasis added) ... that's the only way you can win many people's trust in the community. (FGD 3: CT, MP)

These excerpts, as confirmed by Hurd and Stanton (2022), highlight the centrality of building and maintaining trust in collaborative partnerships with communities. Similar to these findings, communities frequently mention concerns over HEIs' "touch and go" engagement initiatives or research projects that focus on needs assessment, research "on" and not "with" communities, and one-way outreach; departing on the double once their studies are completed, often without disseminating the findings with the community or ensuring collaborative sustainable solutions (McDonald, 2009; Sylvestre et al., 2018; Ubri et al., 2024). The ivory tower of academia, with such "drop in" extractive research, widens the gap between communities and academia and reinforces undesirable disconnected ivory tower perceptions.

Hurd and Stanton (2022) note that community building and transformation hinges on trusting and reciprocally beneficial relationships. A trusting relationship creates a safe space where both the HEI and community partners feel comfortable to share their concerns and work together towards common goals (Akintunde, 2023). For the participants in this study, however, values such as respect and care were also central to the humanising, engaged relationship.

The other thing that is also linked to the collaboration, is the formal and informal processes. There are always agendas [for the activities and engagements], there is always feedback, but there is also always the informal engagements where you see that humanity. It is like you don't see [first name] as a doctor, you just see her as [first name] and you see [senior professor first name] as [first name], and that is the human aspect, that humanness; that is the engagement that we have experienced here, that you have this with the collaboration. (FGD 3: CT, MP)

I am very grateful because it was truly care/warmheartedness that you showed to our people because we are a community and it touches all of us, and I am very thankful for that, honestly. (FGD 4: CT, FP)

These extracts demonstrate that collaborative CE involves both formal and informal processes. It emphasises that participants value the human interactions, the humanity in engagements and engaging community members as equal partners beyond professional titles, cultivating a sense of community and sincere care.

4.7 Continuity: Sustainable community engagement

Sustainability, within a CE approach, refers to the “continuity of benefits” that community members should continue to derive from a project over time, even after the initial participatory engagement with external stakeholders has ended (Taliep, 2022, p. 16). Sustainability essentially infers that the benefits gained from CE projects should continue or “survive” beyond its closure or any unforeseen changes (e.g. restricted funding or a change in project team staff). One imperative element related to sustainability in CE is building sustainable community-university relationships. Ramachandra and Abu Mansor (2014) note that community-university engagements are vital for establishing sustainable long-term relationships that contribute to mutual success, advancing both community building and transformation. Clifford and Petrescu (2012) emphasise that building relationships with diverse community stakeholders and members lies at the core of sustainable community-university engagement. As demonstrated in the following quote, for participants in this study, maintaining continuity was fundamental to sustaining long-term community-university engagement.

Something that stands out for me about engagement is the word ‘continuity’. Look, for example, during that time when [name of senior professor] knew she would be retiring, and the fact that [name] was taking over, and the fact that there are always new people coming, and that is a demonstration of continuity. The engagement is not necessarily linked to a person, and that is the foundation, and that engagement was demonstrated practically. (FGD 3: CT, MP)

This excerpt further addresses the challenge highlighted by Mtawa (2019) regarding fostering and enhancing university-community-engaged scholarship. Mtawa (2019) argues that this field persistently faces major challenges, including constricted attention to higher education's role in transformation and a dependence on the interests and ideals of individual academics and certain units. This passage demonstrates the importance of continuity in community engagement; that engagement is not tied to a single individual, but is a sustained and practical commitment by the institute and its representatives/staff; and is exemplified by the seamless transition when seniors retire, and junior and emerging scholars continue the engagement process. The following quote from a participant in the Johannesburg community further emphasised the importance of smooth handover and continuity:

My engagement, I think I had a good engagement with [name of institution] staff, working with [name of junior researcher] and [name of junior researcher]. I think it was a great experience and we learnt a lot from them, and we had engagements with the communities as well, around my area where we delivered workshops particularly men workshops and also worked with professor [name] which capacitated our organisation in terms of men's issues. I think the challenge that we encountered, or what we found disturbing, it was the handover process, when [name] and [name] were leaving, we only heard from the grapevine that they are no longer working with us, then [name – new junior researcher] will work with us. I think that process was not properly done I think that was a challenge that we encountered, yes, it took us by surprise by the way. (FGD 2: JHB, MP)

Relationship building in community-engaged scholarship is a continuous process that requires institutions to intentionally train younger academics and students in the processes of building long-term meaningful and trusting relationships with communities, which are crucial for sustained collaborative partnerships, maintaining trust, problem-solving, as well as ownership and sustainability of community-based initiatives.

Numerous other factors, many of which were presented and discussed above under the various themes, are also central to long-term sustainable community-university engagements and partnerships. These factors include inclusivity by involving and taking into account the perspectives of a broad array of local stakeholders, building and enhancing trusting relationships, collaborative processes such as partnerships and co-creation of sustainable solutions that align with community needs, engagement that is collaborative and meaningful in nature with the community directly and centrally involved in decision-making, and taking ownership of such solutions (Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Ramachandra & Abu Mansor, 2014; Thorne et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

Engagement with communities can generate innovative solutions to complex societal challenges, promote health equity, and advance social justice agendas by foregrounding communities' voices and priorities. To develop more equitable, collaborative, mutually beneficial, and sustainable partnerships with the community, HEIs, academics, and students need to be aware of community perceptions regarding what CE constitutes and involves. This study explored how community members perceive and understand the nature and core elements of university-community engagement.

Key findings revealed that community members perceive CE as a collaborative process where the community is the central point of convergence, and universities and communities work together by cultivating strong, inclusive collaborative and lasting university-community partnerships based on principles of trust, care, and humanising research agendas. This engagement is further guided by equitable decision-making in the co-creation of solutions to achieve sustainable, long-term outcomes that address existing local issues. The findings further highlighted that knowledge construction is central to community engagement and emphasise the importance for academics and HEIs to acknowledge and recognise that they are crossing an epistemic boundary when engaging with communities. To bridge this community-expert epistemic boundary, academics should to practice epistemic humility and become non-biased, reflexively attentive listeners by respecting and valuing community knowledge. Essentially, turning a blind eye to community voices and experiences undermines the value and effectiveness of community engagement, and perpetuates epistemic injustices. Addressing these injustices involves ensuring that all forms of knowledge are equally valued, aligning with the principles of epistemic justice.

The findings offer a pathway for universities to transcend traditional academic silos and urban privilege, facilitating more equitable community-university engagement. The success of university-community engagement is dependent on ensuring inclusive decision-making; humanising engagement that centres on nurturing trust, respect, fairness, and compassionate care; valuing the community's voice; providing capacity-building support to community partners; and removing structural barriers that hamper equity and inclusion.

Beyond CBPR, these findings align with broader community psychology frameworks, such as systems theory, critical social theory, and decolonial approaches (see Carolissen, 2022; Graham, 2022; Visser, 2022) and liberation psychology (see Jacquez et al., 2021; Roncoroni & Tucker, 2024), by foregrounding community as the central focus, ensuring collaboration, encouraging inclusive participation, engaging with communities as equal partners, emphasising epistemic justice, foregrounding community voices, and supporting sustainable

CE practices. More recently, the 2023 advancements of the Integrated Empowerment Theory further extend these ideas by foregrounding development, both internal and external, which connects self-direction and playing a meaningful role in society through four key catalysts, including connecting individual agency, having a sense of purpose, mentoring experience of facilitators as supportive change agents and equitable engagement with community (Mouchrek & Benson, 2023), offering a valuable framework for situating the guiding principles derived from this study within the broader trajectory of community psychology theory and practice.

5.1 *Limitations and future directions*

Owing to the nature of our engagement/CE approach, as well as our long-standing relationships with the respective communities (and key community members), the experiences reflected in this paper may differ from those in other contexts (e.g., those who have a different approach or those who have been engaging with communities for a shorter period). These experiences can thus not be generalised to all university-community partnerships. In alignment with qualitative research principles, we focus instead on transferability. The study was conducted in two historically marginalised South African communities, which continue to experience the after-effects of apartheid-era displacement, a lack of investment in services, and persistent challenges like unemployment, crime, and violence. These contextual dynamics, alongside prolonged engagement, shaped the findings in ways that may not be directly replicable easily.

Even so, the approach can be meaningfully replicated if engaged scholars adhere to the key principles identified in this study. These include ensuring that the community remains the central point of convergence, building sustained community-university collaborative partnerships that are based on trust, care, inclusivity, reciprocity, and humanising research agendas. In addition, decision-making should be transparent and equitable, and co-creation of solutions must be pursued with epistemic humility to address local challenges. This requires that academics remain reflexively engaged, mindful of their positionality, and respect and value community knowledges equally.

The authors recognise a significant limitation in the gender composition of the FGDs, noting that the gender imbalance might have affected the diversity of perspectives and experiences conveyed. Although the recruitment of participants was conducted by gatekeepers provided with recruitment criteria, the sample ultimately did not achieve gender representativeness for the individual discussions. Additionally, since only FGDs were conducted with key community partners, triangulating data sources from quantitative surveys or additional individual interviews with a more representative sample may provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding, particularly by capturing the perspectives of broader community members through surveys beyond those involved in the FGDs. Individual interviews may also allow us to explore some of the experiences more in depth. Future research should explore the extent to which HEIs' engagements with communities align with community members' perceived expectations and evaluate the long-term impact of community engagement initiatives.

Overcoming institutional constraints to authentic CE comes with its own set of complications and processes. However, an intentional shift in research governance and administrative flexibility is necessary by putting into place practical support mechanisms to facilitate authentic HEI CE. These mechanisms can include allocating resources for dedicated

time to build and nurture relationships with communities, in order to promote long-term, trust-based relationships beyond the immediate scope of the project. Institutions should amend funding frameworks to make allowance for line items that encompass CE essentials, such as safe, reliable transport, catering, and communication costs (e.g. airtime and/or data), and recognise these as legitimate research expenses. In addition, project timelines and funding imperatives must be adapted to accommodate the iterative and relational nature of community engagement, which often extends beyond conventional project cycles and requires intentional maintaining of community-HEI relationships. Capacity-building within institutions, including training not only for researchers but also administrators as well on participatory methods and community partnership principles, is also key to fostering a culture that values and supports sustained, equitable engagement in communities.

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