

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fifty shades of ambivalence: South African student leaders' belonging experiences as indigenous foreigners within higher education

Dr. Neo Pule¹, Mr. Vuyani Muleya², Prof. Aden-Paul Flotman^{2,*}

¹ Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

² Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

* Corresponding author: Aden-Paul Flotman, flotma@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The transformation of South African universities is complex because of the intersections of social, historical, political, cultural, and economic circumstances. Due to the transformation mandate, universities engage student leaders in co-governance to facilitate collaborative efforts toward establishing a sense of belonging for student leaders. However, the complexity of the environment and the transformation task create discrepancies that affect student leaders' sense of belonging. Therefore, this article explores South African student leaders' sense of belonging in the university, using socioanalysis. We gathered verbal and visual data through social dream drawing with student leaders to present an account of their conscious and unconscious lived experiences of belonging. We used thematic analysis to organize the identified themes and sub-themes and interpreted them using a socio-analytic understanding.

The findings suggest that student leaders experience belonging paradoxically as “indigenous foreigners” in higher education, but also ambivalently, hence the reference to Fifty shades of ambivalence in the title. They perceive membership dynamics in various ways: as fluid belonging, with strings attached, as complicated bonding, and as the paradoxical dance between dominance and submission, as well as connecting to shades of legacies and patrimony.

We argue that learning about student leaders' sense of belonging through social dream drawing enhances their leadership agency and facilitates a co-productive, collaborative, and active participation strategy. This process strengthens co-governance practices on multi-relational levels and multiple domains of belonging. Thus, dynamically understanding student leaders' sense of belonging produces positive outcomes for academic structures and integration processes through innovative student engagement.

Keywords: higher education; social dream drawing; student leadership; sense of belonging; socioanalysis

1. Introduction

Belonging, space, place—global research increasingly points to these as key components for fostering a sense of belonging^[1]. This development is especially significant in diversity and inclusion objectives, particularly regarding Indigenous populations^[2-3,1]. Higher education in South Africa and worldwide invests in promoting inclusion and diversity for social justice benefits^[4-6], which some authors^[7,4] link to positive

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 13 March 2025 | Accepted: 20 June 2025 | Available online: 30 June 2025

CITATION

Pule N, Muleya V, Flotman AP. Fifty shades of ambivalence: South African student leaders' belonging experiences as indigenous foreigners within Higher Education. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2025; 10(6): 3517. doi:10.59429/esp.v10i6.3517

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2025 by author(s). *Environment and Social Psychology* is published by Arts and Science Press Pte. Ltd. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

academic outcomes and psychological benefits. In fact, sense of belonging enhances meaning in life^[5], which increases participation and promotes social cohesion and transformation in higher education, including in South Africa^[2,8]. It has been suggested that to create a sense of belonging, universities must prioritize reducing prejudice and recognizing the history of marginalized or previously excluded groups^[4]. This approach pushes universities to transform their traditional ideologies, ensuring they move beyond diversity and inclusion as mere tick-box exercises and, instead, drive institutional cultural change that embodies "belonging" in the very fabric of the university^[2].

Unsettled, perturbed, and highly volatile, these characterize the ambivalence student leadership in South Africa. Ambivalence in this case is the coexistence of conflicting feelings, thoughts, and responses^[9]. Consequently, student leadership remains a contested terrain, demanding a high priority in the higher education agenda^[10-11]. Lambert^[12] boldly states, "to belong is to matter." Therefore, this article aims to expand the understanding of South African student leaders' sense of belonging as indigenous foreigners in higher education, referring to their state of ambivalence as consisting of multiple manifestations. This work uses socioanalysis, applying systems thinking, system psychodynamics, and combining psychoanalysis, group relations, social and organizational behaviour, and social dreaming to understand the psychology and behaviours of student leaders within their intersected contexts^[13]. We view student leadership as a system comprising a complex constellation of subsystems, including political organizations, campus leadership structures, residential bodies, political groups, and ad hoc cultural committees, all operating within the broader South African higher education system^[6]. Our interest in sense of belonging as multiple ambivalences stems from a curiosity about the conscious and below-the-surface dynamics at play in the membership uptake of student leaders in South African universities.

Within psychoanalysis, Freud first conceptualized ambivalence in 1912^[14] as unresolved and repressed conflicting desires between love and aggression. According to Segal^[9] these desires find expression in dreams, which is why we use social dream drawing—A socioanalytic method—To give voice to the shades of ambivalence experienced by student leaders in South Africa. Leading socioanalysis scholar Susan Long^[13] highlighted Freud's and Jung's reference to dreams as a gateway to access unconscious knowledge, thus "drawing the inside out"^[15] through social dream drawing.

To provide context, we first explain socioanalysis and social dream drawing regarding its significance and contribution to this discussion. Thereafter, we discuss the context of student leadership, higher education, and the psychology of belonging to identify the methodological and theoretical knowledge gap, thereby indicating this research's contribution to understanding student leaders' sense of belonging in higher education, specifically in South Africa.

2. Literature review

In the next section, a review of the literature is presented.

2.1. Socioanalysis and social dream drawing

Socioanalysis unfolds the associative unconscious, or the unconscious interconnection within a group or system^[16], to understand below-the-surface dynamics and behaviors in organizations, structures, and institutions^[17]. People in context generate these dynamics, comprising thoughts, feelings, actions, and processes^[18,16]. They project these processes long-term as aspects of the social environment of relationships^[13]. Thus, socioanalysis integrates and develops methodologies and theories to explore, consult, and conduct action research that facilitates the emergence of the associative unconscious as data. This data helps study psychological and social dynamics in the context of various intersections^[15]. This process shifts

the focus from individual experiences to the social and interacting communities, groups, institutions, or systems^[19]. Incorporating psychoanalysis, including system psychodynamics and dreaming within socioanalysis, allows us to interpret group functioning psychoanalytically while applying a systems-thinking mindset, addressing dynamic tensions, interactions between members' emotions and motivations, and the collective norms, rituals, and structures of the social system^[20] using dreams to understand belonging as multiple ambivalences.

Although Freud conceptualized ambivalence as individual functioning, object relations motivate individual lives^[9]. This dependence on cooperation as a basis for adaptation and an inherent capacity for association creates intersubjective determinants of existence^[21-22]. This sense of mutuality^[22] leads to the formation of social units^[9] or groups, necessary for survival^[23]. Thus, the need to survive and the success of group work calibrate ambivalence within a group^[24]. Informed by Bion^[23] and Segal^[9], groups dominated by psychotic functioning stemming from ambivalence display conflicted membership. Lawrence^[25] derived his invention of social dreaming from Bion's^[23] assumptions of group functioning. Thus, the link between the foundational concepts of social dreaming such as being, becoming, unknown thought, and dreaming^[26] and Bion's^[23] assumptions of group functioning can be used to explain student leaders' ambivalence regarding belonging. In this way, we use social dreaming to understand the student leaders' (as a group) experiences of belonging.

Mersky^[15] founded social dream drawing, influenced by Lawrence^[27], and grounded it in the cognitive psychological notion that dreams represent the group's thinking and unconscious thoughts, expressed through symbols, signs, and signifiers that reveal the associative unconscious^[18]. We conceptualize dreams as a bridge between conscious and unconscious thinking in a two-way communication during sleep and the waking state^[27-29]. The drawn dream represents a stimulus that helps to integrate the psychosocial (beyond individual) experience of belonging^[16,18]. Therefore, we use dreams as "psychological work in progress" in support of the emotional processing of lived experiences^[29] to expose the web of student leaders' experiences concerning belonging, including revealing hidden elements typically left unexpressed. During social dream drawing, student leaders and researchers co-construct an understanding of the student leaders' belonging experiences. This understanding of the unconscious forces directly impacts how student leaders perceive and experience higher education as a complex mix of both welcoming and inhospitable spaces. It also involves utilizing their action leadership and agency to facilitate their sense of belonging, contributing to an active participation strategy central to the transformation agenda in South African universities^[6].

2.2. Student leadership, the higher education landscape, and the psychology of sense of belonging

The classical definition of sense of belonging is attributed to Anant p. 21^[30] who defined belonging as a "sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system". Belonging, in a sense, implies the lived experience identification and acceptance by the self and recognition and acceptance by others to enhance success, engagement, and well-being^[31,22]. Therefore, it is an important component for understanding individuals, teams, and organisations. It adds practical value through insights provided into the dynamics and processes of group membership and what it means to contribute positively to one's community.

Some scholars have explored the hidden meaning in the concept of belonging, suggesting that "be" and "longing", or "longing to be", encapsulates a view of *belonging moved by affective dimensions*. "Be" and "long", or "being for long", captures an alternative view of *belonging moved by spatial and temporal dimensions*^[32]. In our study, creating a sense of belonging in a higher education institutional community is

strengthened when it incorporates an understanding of one's identity: "Who am I as a student?" (i.e., belonging as being/part of) or "Who do I want to be as a member of this university community?" (i.e., belonging as becoming). When experiencing estrangement, one's sense of belonging erodes, thereby rendering students, in this instance, unable to contribute meaningfully or productively^[11]. Priming belongingness therefore increases meaningfulness^[33] and consequently meaningful student leadership practice^[6].

Following the South African Higher Education Act of 1997^[34], student leaders' membership is characterised by their key and central role, through co-governance in the intertwined journey of transformation and decolonisation of South African universities^[6]. Simultaneously, the growing body of literature indicates the grappling with student leadership experiences^[11], the university as a social institution^[35], and higher education as a multifaceted social, economic, and political challenge^[36,37].

On NSFAS but sitting in management meetings, knowing the pain of being a black student but having to speak from one voice from with Senate, obsessing over staying committed to my manifesto but rubbing shoulders with the privileged leadership position – they don't want me here, they don't want me there – where do student leaders belong? University culture as an organisational phenomenon^[38], such as the deeply embedded structural and contextual challenges^[10] is accentuated by the campus-expectation climate^[8]. This manifests as relentless pressure to conform, through a curriculum which is largely foreign to the majority, with little space for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and voices^[11]. In the face of these norms, values, and privileged ways of being, students start feeling disconnected, alienated, and disillusioned, which according to Hlengiwe, McKenna and Njovane^[37], strips them of their heritage, identity, and social practices – thus, their sense of belonging. Segal^[9] suggests, psychoanalytically, that when attempting to overcome ambivalence, groups often depend on the most primitive psychotic mechanisms which relate to aggression by projecting it outward and consequently generating antagonisms.

Given the above, it becomes likely that the sense of belonging experiences of student leaders, who have been associated with acts that were labelled as disruptive like the hashtag student movements^[39], would be impacted. These movements, for example, #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall erupted from a quest by students to find their place and voice in the university, for a sense of belonging within the academic structures and processes of integration^[40]. Given the South African higher education imperatives which focus on transformation, decolonisation, and sustainable development^[41], belonging is encouraged for in-group and out-group health due to intergroup support benefits^[22]. Belonging extends beyond social connectedness as it concerns a connection to place and culture – a sense of fitting in^[8], regardless of historical, social, and psychological dynamics and implications, in South African universities. It has meaning for individual and collective belonging because of the system's perspective involving South African student leaders. Thus, eroded sense of belonging manifests as unrest, even unsettledness, and recently, through intermittent violent student protests on the higher education landscape^[41,42].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach and design

This research used a qualitative, multi-university design involving South African institutions. We worked with groups of five to eight student leaders from nine universities, who each contributed dream drawings. We harvested approximately thirty dream drawings, one university at a time. We used an iterative research approach, with a socioanalytic underpinning that allowed for dynamic, non-linear, and synchronous data emergence and knowledge creation^[13].

Student leaders participated through purposive, volunteer sampling, which included those elected according to the Higher Education Act (1997) ^[34] or the South African National Student Governance Framework. Additionally, we considered student leaders beyond formal representation roles for inclusion. The participants primarily consisted of student representative council members, leaders of student clubs (especially political and residential), and activists.

3.2. Social dream drawing process

We followed a social dream drawing process grounded in principles of research rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness^[43]. The process prioritized non-linear and synchronous thinking^[26], which intertwined data collection and analysis^[13]. Before meeting with the researchers, student leaders received an information letter detailing the process, its purpose, and an invitation to bring a drawing of a dream (sleep-related) they could connect to their student leadership experience.

Each dream drawing session lasted an hour and involved both verbal and visual data. The verbal data consisted of descriptions of the dream, while the visual data included the drawings of the dreams, which were later photographed^[18]. We allocated fifteen minutes for each participant to describe their dream and drawing, and for the group (comprising researchers and student leaders) to ask clarifying questions. Group members then provided free associations for 20 to 25 minutes. Free associations involved anything that came to mind—Such as a memory, movie, word, or thought—Related to the dream^[15]. The associations floated without premature analysis, forming new links and ideas related to student leadership experiences, which also indicated early stages of data analysis^[28].

After that, the group spent another 20 to 25 minutes on a meaning-making exercise, focusing on student leadership experiences. This phase began with the prompt: “Now that we have made these associations, this is what we now understand about student leadership experience...” As the group shared each dream and its drawing, new imagery, associations, and insights emerged, deepening the understanding of student leadership experiences. This meaning-making exercise served as both a data collection component, with the verbalization of thoughts and new insights, and an analysis component, through connecting associations and generating hypotheses.

The social dream drawing process was cyclical, with each dream exploration building upon previous ones. Additionally, we could link dream drawing data in any sequence, without adhering to a strict order. The researchers then conducted a thematic analysis of student leadership experiences, using Otter.ai transcriptions of verbal data. We performed member checking^[43] by consulting participants on the researchers’ interpretations of the data. We also engaged in triangulation through a data panel based on the Balint group method^[45]. An international audience of social dreaming experts made additional free associations to the dream drawings, contributing further insights on student leadership experiences while the researchers observed.

We ultimately selected four dream drawings to highlight student leadership experiences related to belonging. The discussion of belonging among student leaders in South African universities demonstrated the principle of the associative unconscious^[16], a systems lens, and a collective-inspired paradigm^[26,13]. We worked from the premise that a whole is made up of its parts, while each part maintains its own integrity. The dream drawings revealed individual experiences of student leaders, while our socioanalytic focus brought forward group-level and university-level experiences, along with their collective experiences as student leaders in South Africa.

3.3. Ethical considerations

The General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) at the principal investigator's employing university granted ethical clearance for this research. Each university involved also provided institutional permission to collect data.

4. Descriptions of dreams and presentation of dream drawings

Paraphrased descriptions of dreams and drawings is provided below while corresponding dream drawing photographs are displayed.

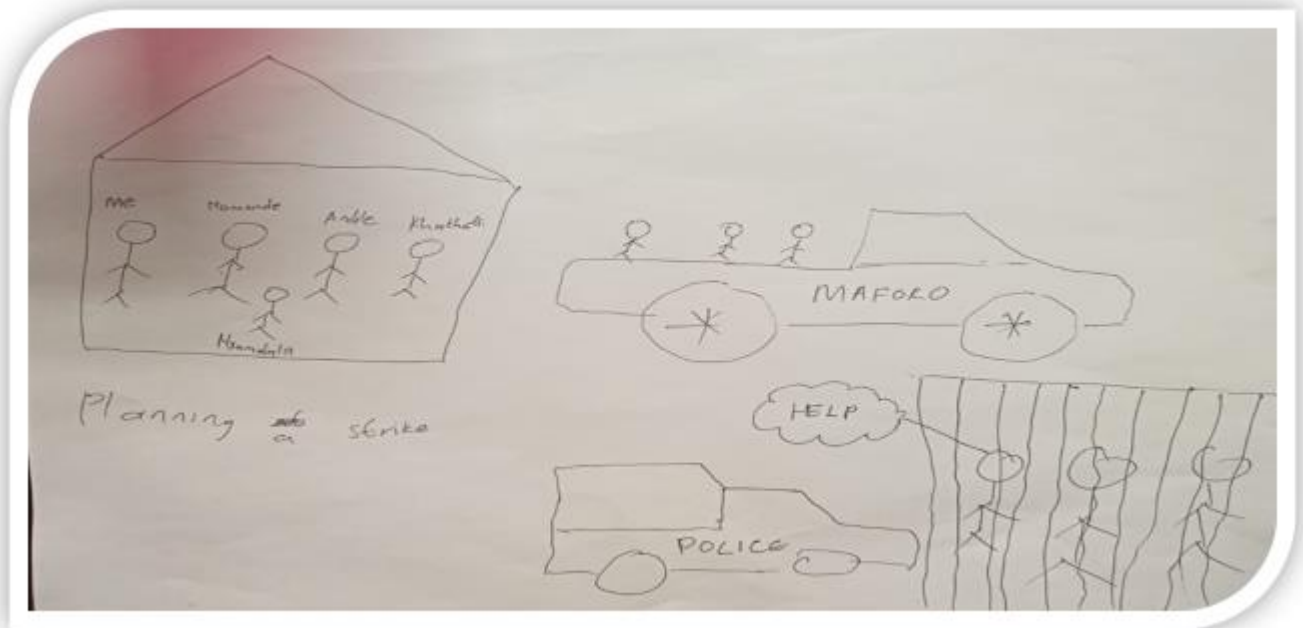


Figure 1. Bondage.

The dreamer explained that the dream felt like a reliving of a lived experience of his. In the dream, students who were arrested were not those arrested in the lived experience. He remarked:

“We [student leaders] wanted to embark on a revolution to fight for student allowances and as the day continued [in the dream] most of us were captured.”

He further explained that student leaders were taken in a van, into police custody by the police. Additionally, campus control safety and security called Mafoko security [mafoko means words] helped the police to take leaders to the police station where they were transferred to a prison. Some of the students spent a night or two in the prison cell. The dream was very confusing. One of the leaders was crying for help.

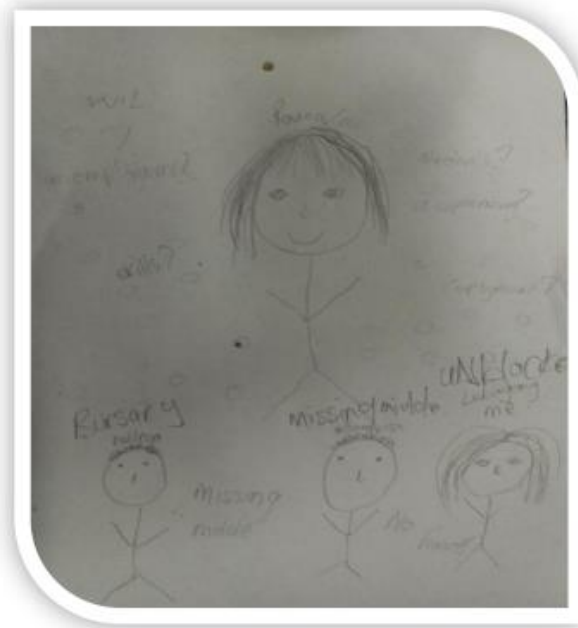


Figure 2. Muted and silenced.

The dreamer described the dream as being about seeking funding for herself and other students in a similar situation. She needed registration and accommodation fees at the beginning of the year so that her profile could be unblocked for access to various university facilities. It was a unique experience for her as she had bursaries since her first year of tertiary education up until now. Now however, she knew how it felt like to be financially excluded. She reported: *“I finally experienced how it feels like to be part of the missing middle.”* As a student leader, she realised she could do something about it. She decided to hold a meeting with a potential funder, an online meeting. During it, she tried to express herself to the funder regarding her own needs, and that of the other students similarly situated. However, her microphone was muted. She tried to unmute it, but the controls were on the funder’s settings.

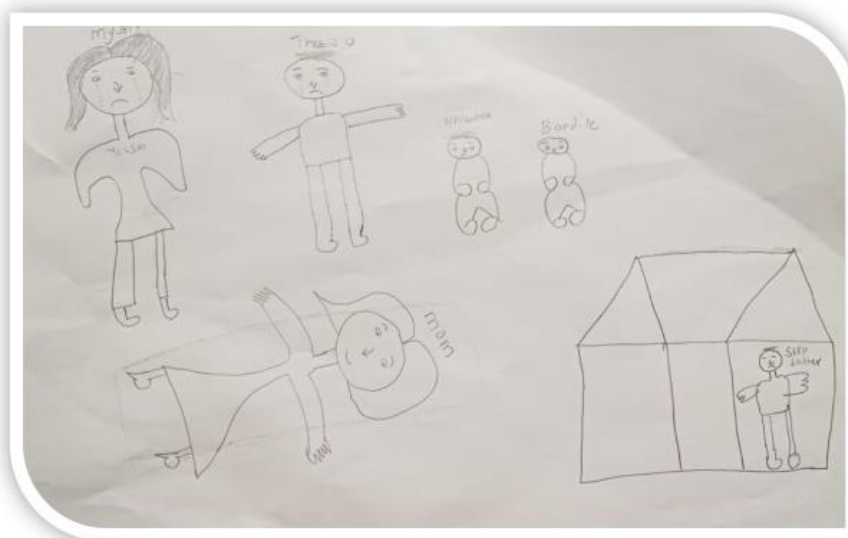


Figure 3. Absent fathers, sleeping mothers.

The student leader indicated herself to be the figure in the top left of the drawing. In real life, as in the dream, she described she had not been on good terms with her elder brother. In the dream, her mother was sick, lying in bed, outside the house. Her father (step – father) had locked himself inside the house. She and her younger brother were crying about this situation. Because no elder was taking care of her two youngest siblings, the dreamer had to. She could not discuss this with her elder brother because they were not on good terms, although she expected him to rise to the occasion.



Figure 4. Chased by dogs (A).

The dreamer described that he was walking home from the university. On the way, he came across dogs which started to chase him. He was crying and felt more anxiety as the community in his neighbourhood watched him from the side of the road without helping him.



Figure 5. Chased by dogs (B).

The dreamer explained that in the dream he was walking with his girlfriend to introduce her to his family. The street was dark, unlit. Out of the blue, two dogs appeared and started barking at her. He came in front of her because his first instinct was to protect her. The dogs continued barking; the girlfriend started to cry. More dogs came and the situation became more dangerous - there were big and small dogs. Here the dream ended.

5. Findings and discussion

This section details the themes and sub-themes regarding the multiple manifestation, described as fifty shades of ambivalence, pertaining to South African student leaders' experiences of belonging as indigenous foreigners within higher education. References extracted from gathered data including literature informed interpretations of this data to discuss the topic of interest are offered.

5.1. Indigenous foreigners: Uyangifaka noma uyangikhipha? (Am I in or out?)

The central theme regarding student leaders' sense of belonging, captured in the idea of indigenous foreigners which manifests in multiple ambivalence, emerged from the dream drawing themed bondage [Figure 1]. This theme was based on an association contributed during social dream drawing where being in prison was likened to bondage. Bondage led to another association, namely *Fifty shades of Grey* [the 2015 movie], hence the title of this article, from which meaning making emerged around the dynamics of belonging that ensue ambivalence. Ambivalence (holding of contradictory experiences) often leads to uncertainty, confusion, and indecisiveness. It is the state of having simultaneous and conflicting attitudes, experiences and or feelings towards either the same person, an object, or situation [13], in this context, students' mixed feelings regarding their subjective experiences of sense of belonging. The data panel associated the same symbol with equality of forces: Every time *you* rise, *we* would rise to match up. Due to the dynamics of power, the imprisonment of students is an inevitable phenomenon. Simultaneously, the panel linked imprisoned students to being cornered as the drawn prison was contained by the edge of the drawing. Additionally, thoughts regarding imprisonment in one's mind, and fantasised imprisonment, emerged.

The subsidiary - *Uyangifaka noma uyangikhipha*, translated as *I am in or out?* is an IsiZulu phrase often used by a young man who had been courting a young lady of his dreams for a prolonged period; but he is still unsure if the lady in question loves him or not. In such a scenario, the lady would flirt with him, and she would give him time and attention, but she does not confirm her feelings for him. He is therefore not sure where he stands. Does she see him as a platonic friend, or does she see him as a potential mating partner? The question is asked with the hope of ending the mysterious flirting to find "belonging" with her.

This phenomenon "Indigenous Foreigners: Uyangifaka noma uyangikhipha?" was characterised by a tension regarding how on the one hand student leaders are given voice through their leadership position, while concurrently restricted. This restriction was shown in the control exerted regarding how student leaders used words, "*You say the wrong thing, then you are suppressed*". The idea around the use of words came from playing with the label *Mafoko*, the name of the safety and security company, which means "words", in English [Figure 1]. Associatively, it pointed to the policing of how words are used, generating the idea of thought police who take student leaders to prison for saying the wrong thing. Thus, the university has the power to take student leaders in [into the university, into prison, etc.] and to take them out, via the transgressions linked to their unfavourable word usage, also linked to silencing [Figure 2].

This ambivalence between the love-stricken young man and the young lady playing "hard to get", can be likened to the relationship between university student leaders and the university institution itself. It had

been the students' dream to study there, following their perception that the university will change their lives for the better. They are excited about the prospects of a good relationship between themselves and their loved one [metaphorically], the university. But to their surprise, upon entry things are not as smooth and exciting as expected. They do not particularly feel at home. Like the girl in the scenario above, the university seems to be welcoming enough yet still distant enough to leave them feeling simultaneously confused and in love.

Equally, student leaders feel a strong attachment to the university. Most of them have met their best friends, life partners, and business partners within this community. This implies that they concurrently feel at home and out of place—hence their experience as *indigenous foreigners*. As much as they acknowledge the things that make them not to belong, they also recognize the comradeship and subjective lived experiences that bind them to the name and place of their institution, and so, like uncertain lovers, they constantly find themselves metaphorically dancing in and out, back, and forth, on a continuum of love and hate. With every semester that passes, student leaders find themselves asking the university that proverbial question *uyanghipha noma uyangifaka?* With this, one might ask: What are the unwritten rules that facilitate belonging, some of them that are never exposed and some of them that get figured out along the way?

5.2. Who let the dogs out? – Articulating a sense of displacement in belonging

Dream 4 and 5 captures a theme, “being chased by dogs” which carries feelings of fear, discomfort, estrangement – a feeling of not belonging. For example, during the Apartheid era, dogs were used by the police not only to instil fear, but also to torment Black people who did not follow the “rules”. Furthermore, dogs were historically, used as a weapon to control the other and to fragment the collective cohesion of the other. Therefore, dogs may appear to have representative/representational value. Accordingly, dogs could signify buildings, symbols and languages that represent the colonial ruling class; and act as a constant reminder of past injustices and current day collective suffering endured by Black people because of the colonial project in South Africa. Therefore, the buildings and infrastructures, especially for Black students from townships and villages, are foreign compared to where they come from. This infrastructural dichotomy may create a sense of displacement in the students' psyche (Griffiths, 2019), especially upon their return after visiting home. The stark differences could serve as a constant reminder that the university is in fact not their home. They do not belong there. Similarly, the presence of certain symbols and artefacts (Jansen, 2019) such as the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, also serve as continual reminders that the university is not their home.

Accordingly, dogs act as embodiments of structural injustice such as the unjust policies (such as F7, NSFAS Missing Middle policy, etc.) which do not seem to accommodate all students or consider students' everyday subjective experiences. These policies, particularly the missing middle refers to students who come from homes whose combined household income is too high to make the NSFAS threshold but too low to afford fees – between R350 000 and R600 000 per annum DHET (2020). The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is a government owned entity which funds all eligible post-school students in South Africa whose combined household income is R350 000 per annum or less^[46]. Thus, students who are referred to as the missing middle may qualify for financial aid to pursue or complete their studies. Metaphorically or symbolically, the missing middle would be one who is unseen while caught in between two opposing forces of competing interest, such as top management and student constituencies.

Student leaders reportedly feel as though management sees them as anarchists who enjoy disrupting the academic project for the sake of clout and political relevance. Management discards them as young, inexperienced noisemakers who have no decorum nor respect for university policies and processes.

Simultaneously, the student populace sees the student leaders as sell-outs who are metaphorically in bed with management whenever they are unable to meet the student populace' expectations. Student leaders further explained that fellow students tend to see them as the elite group who cannot be trusted once they ascend to power because they become detached from the reality on the ground, due to proximity to management and having access to exclusive university resources such as better accommodation and university vehicles. Ironically, both management and the student populace tend to run to student leaders for answers or intervention whenever there is a crisis within the university. Both want to "sleep with them" (they are using them), but no one wants to love them (there is no empathy or genuine care). Student leaders therefore feel like the real missing middle [Figure 2], or the unseen in the middle raising a love and a hate for the coveted comfortable and privileged position of leadership that lends them in isolation. Thus, dogs could also represent institutional and systemic challenges and in their act of chasing, threaten one's sense of belonging and one's identity as a student leader.

5.3. Membership: Dynamics of fluid belonging

Pedler^[22] states that one's personal sense of belonging or membership cannot be complete without the sense of the belonging of the other. This phenomenon was observed in the using of dream drawings to explore belonging experiences which seemed to integrate the sense of belonging of the self, with the sense of belonging of the other. For example, the nurturing of sense of belonging appeared to be dependent on an awareness of who the gatekeepers or boundary managers are, letting in or keeping out such as university authorities, funders, committees, and so forth, can act as protectors of organisational cultures^[8]. Sense of belonging appears to be an important boundary management role or function. As reflected in dream drawing [Figure 2], student leaders often claimed that they must "push to be unblocked". Thus, being privileged and in power, like a leadership position, further secures and embeds the sense of belonging of the in-group^[11,47].

Secondly, there appears to be an overlap between *membership and identity*. People often claim that they feel being part of a family yet experience intense feelings of not belonging [Figure 3]. This perceived paradox is also indicative of students lived, phenomenological experiences, for example, being part of the university community by membership/registration only. This ambivalent sense of belonging is characterised by feeling homeless, yet they have a home/family (because they are registered students at the university). Consequently, they feel like stepchildren, with missing parents, hurting, and experiencing an intense desire for care, comfort, and provision as shown through the dream drawings (e.g., Figure 3). Student leaders report to wish to belong and agonise over, or reminisce about, what they perceive as a lost or missed opportunity regarding their sense of belonging. Accordingly, they experience membership dynamics variously, with strings attached, complicated bonding, and the paradoxical dance between dominance and submission, and with a sense of connecting to shades of legacies and patrimony.

5.4. Strings attached, complicated bonding and the paradoxical dance between dominance and submission

One of the gateways to a sense of belonging appears to be the capacity to genuinely listen to the other [Figures 2 and 3]. Student leaders struggle to listen because they feel they themselves are not being heard [Figure 2]. Due to management and students being worlds apart literally, and figuratively, no one sees the efforts and intentions of the other. In the dream [Figure 2: muted and silenced], the funder was able to speak to the students and they could hear her; however, she could not hear their responses as their microphones were muted and they could not unmute them. She could not see their efforts to unmute themselves and therefore concluded that they were wasting her time. This relationship dynamic can be likened to the student-management relationship within the university context whereby management has various ways of

communicating with the student populace and getting their messages across; however, there are not enough channels of communication open for students to communicate with management (red tape) to get their messages across. Hence, there is a lot of misunderstanding and false assumptions between the two parties [Figures 1, 4 and 5]. The disconnect results in communications that appear in fifty shades - multiple forms of connection that lead to ambivalence.

This could explain the high prevalence of tension and protest action at South African universities. Perhaps students opt for such action as a go - to resort because they feel unheard and muted by the standard communication channels available. Psychoanalysts [23, 48-49, 21-22] describe our inherent need for association and cooperation which, through felt recognition and acknowledgement, creates mutuality. Thus, when feeling heard, a sense of belonging forms and conversely, a retaliation forms from the frustration linked to needing to experience belonging. Simultaneously, subjective discomfort also appears to be necessary for transformational action: The dreamer [Figure 2] explained that she had never been financially excluded before as she always had access to bursaries since her first year. It was her first experience of being excluded that prompted her to act by attempting to secure funding for herself and other students in a similar position.

5.5. Connecting shades of legacies and patrimony

In the African context, fathers are seen as heads of household and inherent leaders in the family structure. They are expected to shape the family culture and drive the family's vision. That is why family members usually use the father's surname. The leadership responsibility is bestowed upon them. Thus, in their absence it is implied that the family will be confused and directionless, especially if they are absent by choice instead of through death. Similarly, in the university context, the data likens top management to fathers and absent fathers through Figure 3, in the sense that they are inaccessible and unavailable. Everyone knows that they are there, however no one can reach them whenever there is a crisis or even during times of celebration. This results in the university community, especially students who are the most distant hierarchically, feeling confused and uncared for, making them experience the university space as cold and unwelcoming.

Additionally, the theme regarding the missing fathers/fatherhood (and to some extent motherhood), [Figure 3], appears to present a phenomenon with which students are wrestling, expressed as "...my father is there, but he is absent to you from/on the inside...". It may be that the student leaders' quest for belonging is linked to finding the absent or missing father within themselves or within their leadership. There is a sense emerging from the data about how absent fathers pose a lot of judgement on themselves, experience guilt, and maybe even punish themselves for unmet expectations, some of which can be set by society or parties external to the relationship. These are ideas about the good-enough or bad-enough father and how this is projected to the family, to facilitate a sense of belonging. This is likened to student leaders' expression of their anger, introjected inward and projected towards the university [by burning buildings – Figure 1], their constituencies, and management. To restore sense of belonging therefore, there may be place for the role of forgiveness and reconciliation, in which a sense of belonging can emerge. This can be likened to the father who is repentant and then behaves differently to previous occasions and who requires forgiveness from the family, to move forward.

If student leaders are seen as children of post-apartheid, then they could represent the child-headed households where the blind are leading the blind. This is a phenomenon and call to action in which the dreamer in Figure 3 for example finds herself having to step up and raise her younger siblings whilst she herself is still young and confused. Similarly, university student leaders are expected to do the impossible, assisting students with challenges that are sometimes beyond their capacity. This is unfortunately the reality

in which most student leaders find themselves - having to lead without clarity, with limited resources, and with scant support. But they soldier on, stretching themselves beyond capacity, which results in mental breakdowns, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this research reveal that learning about student leaders' sense of belonging through social dream drawing illuminates their already existing leadership agency that is catapulted into self-authorised actions towards sense of belonging. Additionally, their self-awareness regarding their responsibility about the role of the other in relation to their sense of belonging, is heightened. Furthermore, the action research attribute of social dream drawing helps student leaders recognise, explore, process, and reflect on action leadership which they can then implement regarding their sense of belonging. This action research approach may contribute towards innovative programmes of sense of belonging for student leaders. We believe that innovative programmes should include, regular social dream drawing sessions, and systems psychodynamically informed listening posts, aimed at exploring the unconscious experiences of student leaders' sense of belonging in higher education. Such an approach of engagement facilitates a co-productive, collaborative, and active participation strategy that enhances co-governance practices, for multi-relational levels and multiple domains of belonging. Undoubtedly, understanding student leaders' sense of belonging dynamically poses positive outcomes for academic structures and the process of integration through innovative student engagement.

The study reinforces Lawrence's^[25] notion that by dreaming, unknown sense of belonging thoughts is revealed. Through dream drawing, these thoughts become known and can be verbalised, associated with, and connected to meaning. Social dream drawing thereby facilitates a process of becoming in terms of having a sense of belonging within student leadership within their respective South African universities. This both underpins and leads to a reformed position of existence, which we understand as related to (new) being.

Consistently, socioanalytic methods like social dream drawing, enable compassionate and empathetic processes that provide psychological safety and containment^[23,48] for student leaders in South African universities to attain a sense of belonging. Ultimately, student leaders' positive psychological health as well as social cohesion and transformation in Higher Education is achieved.

This study acknowledges the African notion that "*the child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth*" (African Proverb).

Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the contributions of all our participants at different universities in South Africa. They have been an invaluable resource in the evolution of our thinking about the nature and dynamics of sense of belonging.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Allen, K-A., Kern M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D. M. & Slavich, G. M. (2021). "Belonging: a review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research". *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), 87–102. DOI:10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409
2. Adejumo, V. (2021). Beyond diversity, inclusion, and belonging. *Leadership*, 17(1), 62-73.

3. Itam, U. & Bagali M. M. (2018). Diversity and Inclusion Management: A Focus on Employee Engagement. In N. Sharma, V. Singh, & S. Pathak (Eds.), *Management Techniques for a Diverse and Cross-Cultural Workforce* (pp. 149-171). IGI Global Scientific Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-4933-8.ch009>
4. Brannon, T. N., & Lin, A. (2021). "Pride and prejudice" pathways to belonging: Implications for inclusive diversity practices within mainstream institutions. *American Psychologist*, 76(3), 488.
5. Iso-Ahola, S.E., & Baumeister, R.F. (2023). Leisure and meaning in life. *Front. Psychol.* 14:1074649. <https://doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1074649>
6. Pule, N.T. & May, M. (2021). "Insights on student leadership using social dream drawing: Six propositions for the transformation role of South African student leaders". *Transformation in Higher Education*, 6(0), a138. <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v6i0.138>
7. Allen, K. A., Gray, D. L., Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (2022). The need to belong: A deep dive into the origins, implications, and future of a foundational construct. *Educational psychology review*, 34(2), 1133-1156.
8. Bazana, S., & Mogotsi, O.P. (2017). "Social identities and racial integration in historically white universities: A literature review of the experiences of black students." *Transformation in Higher Education*, 2(a25). <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v2i0.25>
9. Segal, H. (2019). "The achievement of ambivalence." *Common Knowledge*, 25(1)-3: 51–62.
10. Badat, S. (2010). "The Challenges of Transformation in Higher Education and Training Institutions in South Africa." *Development Bank of Southern Africa* 8.
11. Davids, N., & Waghid, Y. (2022). *Democratic Education as Inclusion*. Lexington Books.
12. Lambert, C.T. (2021). The impact of environmental and social factors on learning abilities: a meta-analysis. *Biological Reviews*. 96(6), 2871-2889. <https://doi.org/10.1111/brv.12783>
13. Long, S. (2017). The socioanalytic approach to organisations. *Socio-Analysis*, 19: 1–7.
14. Freud, S. (1912). *The Dynamics of Transference*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works, 97-108.
15. Mersky, R. R. (2013). "Social Dream Drawing: Drawing Brings the Inside Out." In *Psychosocial Methods: Discovering the Hidden in Organisations and Social Systems*, S. Long (ed):153–178. Karnac.
16. Long, S. & Harney, M. (2013). "The Associative Unconscious". *Socioanalytic Methods: discovering the hidden in organisations and social systems* S. Long (ed.) 3 – 22. London: Routledge.
17. Mayer C-H. & Oosthuizen R. M. (2022). "Unconscious system-psychodynamics within a German 4IR engineering company in South Africa". *Front. Psychol.* 13:926245. <https://doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2022.926245>
18. Mersky, R. & Sievers, B. (2019). "Social photo-matrix and social dream-drawing". K. Stamenova and R.D. Hinshelwood (eds.) *Methods of research into the unconscious: Applying psychoanalytic ideas to social science: 145–168*. Routledge.
19. Long, S., & Manley, J. (2019). (eds.) *Social dreaming: Philosophy, research, theory and practice*. Routledge.
20. Vince, R. (2018). Institutional illogics: The unconscious and institutional analysis. *Organisational Studies*, 40: 953–973.
21. Trotter, W. (1909). Sociological application of the psychology of herd instinct. *The Sociological Review*, 2(1): 36–54.
22. Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. E. (2021). A sense of belonging at university: student retention, motivation and enjoyment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(3), 397–408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844>
23. Bion, W. R. (1961). *Experiences in groups*. Tavistock.
24. Bain, A. (1998). Social defenses against organizational learning. *Human relations*, 51(3), 413–429.
25. Lawrence, W. G. (2005). *Introduction to Social Dreaming*. Transforming Thinking. Karnac.
26. Manley, J. (2014). Gordon Lawrence's Social Dreaming Matrix: background, origins, history, and developments. *Organisational and Social Dynamics*, 14(2), 322–341.
27. Lawrence, W. G. (1999). *Exploring individual and organisational boundaries*. Karnac.
28. Mersky, R. R. (2012). Contemporary methodologies to surface and act on unconscious dynamics in organisations: An exploration of design, facilitation capacities, consultant paradigm and ultimate value. *Organisational and Social Dynamics*, 12(1), 19–43.
29. Schneider, J.A. (2010). From Freud's dream-work to Bion's work of dreaming: The changing conception of dreaming in psychoanalytic theory. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 91(3), 521–540
30. Anant, S.S. (1966). Belongingness and mental health: Some research findings. *Acta Psychologica* 26: 391–396. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-6918\(67\)90035-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-6918(67)90035-2).
31. Gopalan, M., & Brady, S.T. (2019). College Students' Sense of Belonging: A National Perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 49(2): 134–137 <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19897622>
32. Filstad C, L., Traavik, E.M. & Gorli, M. (2019). Belonging at work: the experiences,

35. representations and meanings of belonging. *Journal of Workplace Learning*. 3(2), 116–142. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JWL-06-2018-0081>
36. Lambert, N.M., Stillman, T.F., Hicks, J.A., Kamble, S., Baumeister, R.F., & Fincham, F.D. (2013). To Belong Is to Matter: Sense of Belonging Enhances Meaning in Life” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39(11): 1418–1427. DOI:10.1177/0146167213499186
37. DHET. (2020). Revised Strategic Plan 2020-2025. Retrieved from <https://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/DHET%20Strategic%20Plan%202020.pdf>
38. Soroka, O., Kalaur, S., & Balendr, A. (2020). Monitoring of Corporate Culture Formation of Specialists of Social Institutions. *Postmodern Openings*, 11(1Sup1), 218-233. <https://doi.org/10.18662/po/11.1sup1/131>
39. Davids, N. (2021). Democratising South African universities: From activism to advocacy. *Policy Futures in Education* 19(5), 568–581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103211003421>
40. Hlengiwe, A., McKenna, S., & Njovane, T. (2018). “The lenses we use to research student experiences.” *Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good* Paul Ashwin and Jennifer M. Case (eds). *African Minds*.
41. Osterman K.F. (2023). Teacher Practice and Students’ Sense of Belonging. In: Lovat, T., Toomey, R., Clement, N., Dally, K. (eds) *Second International Research Handbook on Values Education and Student Wellbeing*. Springer International Handbooks of Education. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24420-9_54
42. Griffiths, D. (2019). #FeesMustFall and the decolonised university in South Africa: Tensions and opportunities in a globalising world. *International Journal of Educational Research* 94: 143–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.01.004>
43. Swartz, R., Ivancheva, M., Czerniewicz, L. & Morris, N.P. (2019). Between a rock and a hard place: Dilemmas regarding the purpose of public universities in South Africa. *Higher Education* 77(4), 567–583. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0291-9>
44. Akhtar, S. (2018). *Mind, Culture, and Global Unrest: Psychoanalytic Reflections*. Routledge.
45. Pule, N. (2022). South African student leadership unrest and unsettled constructions: a CIBART analysis. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36 (2): 239–257.
46. Leedy, P.D., & Ormrod, J.E. (2014) (eds). “Practical research: Planning and design.” *Qualitative research*: 141–172. Pearson Education.
47. Jansen, J. (2019). *As by Fire: The End of the South African University*. Tafelberg.
48. Salinsky, J. (2018). Balint groups and the Balint method." *Supervision and Support in Primary Care*. 79–90. CRC Press.
49. Whitelaw, E., Branson., N., & Leibbrandt, M. (2022). Social stratification around the NSFAS funding threshold: A dynamic approach to profiling the missing middle. (SALDRU Working Paper No.288) Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town.
50. Davids, N. (2021). Democratising South African universities: From activism to advocacy. *Policy Futures in Education*, 19(5), 568–581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103211003421>
51. Bion, W. R. (1978). Selections from “Experiences in groups”. In A. D. Colman and W. H. Bexton (Eds.), *Group relations reader 1*: 11–20. A. K. Rice Institute.
52. Bion, W. R. (1991). *Learning from experience*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson. (Original work published 1961).
53. Ahn, M. Y., & Davis, H. H. (2020). Students’ sense of belonging and their socio-economic status in higher education: a quantitative approach. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(1), 136–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1778664>