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Research Article

Understanding inequalities and mental well-being in higher education: An Afrocentric perspective

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Abstract

Grounded in an Afrocentric epistemological framework, this research study aimed to deepen culturally relevant insights into mental well-being in higher education by foregrounding African worldviews, relationality, and collective healing practices. Through Participatory Action Research (PAR), data were collected at two historically White universities via narrative interviews and photo-voice, allowing 20 students to reflect on and document their lived experiences of inequality and mental well-being within institutional contexts. The findings demonstrate that structural inequalities manifesting directly through institutional exclusion and inequalities in access to educational and financial resources, severely disrupt the relational networks central to an Afrocentric understanding of well-being, significantly impacting students' mental well-being and their communal sense of belonging within university settings. Participants articulated experiences of anxiety, isolation, stress, and cultural dislocation associated with unequal educational backgrounds and exclusionary institutional cultures. Concurrently, the research study underscores culturally rooted coping mechanisms, including prayer, peer solidarity, community support, and collective belonging, as important sources of resilience and healing. Through the integration of PAR with Afrocentric epistemologies, this research contributes to the expanding scholarship on decolonial approaches to student mental well-being by contesting dominant Eurocentric biomedical paradigms. It provides a culturally grounded framework for comprehending mental well-being in higher education and offers practical insights for the development of equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive mental well-being support systems that promote epistemic justice within university contexts.

Keywords: Afrocentric perspective, higher education, inequalities, participatory action research, psychosocial well-being.

Introduction and Conceptualisation

University students are increasingly recognised as a population vulnerable to mental health challenges, with significant implications for their academic achievement and personal development (Bantjes et al., 2023; Eloff & Graham, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) affirms that the highest attainable standard of health is a fundamental right for every human being, irrespective of race, religion, political beliefs, or socio-economic status, a vision that positions mental health and well-being as cornerstones of human rights, peace, and collective flourishing (WHO, 2020). Yet for Black African students at South African universities the focal population of this research study shows that a profound gap exists between this ideal and their lived reality. These students, many of whom are navigating the transition from historically marginalised backgrounds, encounter systemic inequalities, cultural disconnection, and persistent emotional stress as pervasive features of university life (Khumalo & Sibanda, 2023).

Mental well-being, as understood in this research study, extends well beyond the absence of distress. It encompasses emotional, social, and cultural dimensions that enable individuals to engage actively and meaningfully with their communities (De Klerk & Du Toit, 2023). Luu and Abraham (2024) demonstrate that students' mental health is deeply intertwined with the institutional and societal structures that shape their educational experiences, structures that, in the South African context, bear the enduring imprint of colonialism and apartheid (De Jager, 2023). This legacy manifests in everyday institutional practices such as English-only instruction, Western-oriented curricula, and the systematic marginalisation of African epistemologies (Dipitso, 2022; Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Lumadi, 2021). For the purposes of this research study, structural inequalities are understood as the entrenched systemic barriers and historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid that continue to marginalise Black African students economically, culturally, and academically. These inequalities generate cultural dissonance, erode a sense of belonging, and contribute to stress and identity concerns (Calitz, 2018). Students frequently feel compelled to conceal their cultural identities in order to gain acceptance, with adverse consequences for their mental well-being and self-esteem (Mgqwashu et al., 2020).

Despite South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 and the subsequent diversification of the student body, universities, particularly historically White universities (HWUs), have not evolved culturally at the same pace as their shifting demographics (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). Black African students from rural and township backgrounds continue to study within institutions governed by Eurocentric norms that marginalise their cultures, languages, and lived experiences (Matsepe et al., 2020; Mgqwashu et al., 2020). At HWUs, this translates into experiences of exclusion, stigma, and a pervasive institutional whiteness that undermines self-esteem, belonging, and academic achievement (Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Eloff & Graham, 2020; Kessi & Cornell, 2015).

The post-apartheid expansion of access to higher education presents a stark paradox. While Black African student enrolment has risen considerably, severe financial and linguistic barriers continue to undermine academic trajectories, and HWUs have frequently failed to accommodate the social identities of this growing demographic resulting in profound feelings of alienation (Agumba et al., 2023; Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023; Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025). Disadvantaged students face compounded barriers: limited resources, academic difficulty, and social isolation (Molokwane & Zogli, 2021). Movements such as #FeesMustFall have rendered visible the intersection of financial stress, race, and institutional exclusion, and their collective toll on mental well-being (Bantjes et al., 2023; Luu & Abraham, 2024). Despite rising awareness of these concerns, institutional responses have largely relied on Eurocentric frameworks and overstretched services, failing to account for the cultural and structural dimensions of students' distress. How students' identities and well-being are reshaped within these contradictory spaces remains a critical and under-explored concern (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017).

This research study responds to that gap by offering a nuanced examination of how Black African university students understand and experience mental well-being. Moving beyond Western frameworks, it adopts an Afrocentric perspective and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as its analytical lens. Afrocentric approaches to mental well-being foreground the importance of culturally relevant support for African people and advocate for an African-centred psychology that better reflects and addresses the realities of African psychological experience (Awosogba et al., 2023; Lumadi, 2021). This lens is particularly significant given that universities play a crucial role not only in intellectual development, but in offering pathways out of poverty and toward social mobility (Zaaiman, 2022) a role fundamentally compromised when the mental well-being of a significant portion of the student population goes unaddressed.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing body of research on mental well-being and inequalities in higher education, a significant gap remains in scholarship that genuinely engages with the lived experiences of Black African students in South Africa. Many existing studies generalise about mental well-being issues without sufficiently considering the intersecting influences of racism, social class, language, and cultural backgrounds on these students' well-being. As a result, current frameworks for student mental well-being support often overlook the complex, specific challenges faced by students from historically marginalised communities. These services are frequently perceived as culturally alienating, difficult to access, and misaligned with the needs of students who must navigate academic pressures alongside systemic inequalities.

Aim

There is an urgent need for higher education institutions to develop inclusive, contextually grounded mental well-being strategies that integrate student voices, community knowledge, and culturally responsive practices. This research study aimed to address this gap by examining mental well-being and structural inequalities at two South African universities from an Afrocentric perspective using Participatory Action Research (PAR). It seeks to highlight students' real-life experiences and support the development of more equitable and culturally sensitive mental well-being systems within South African universities.

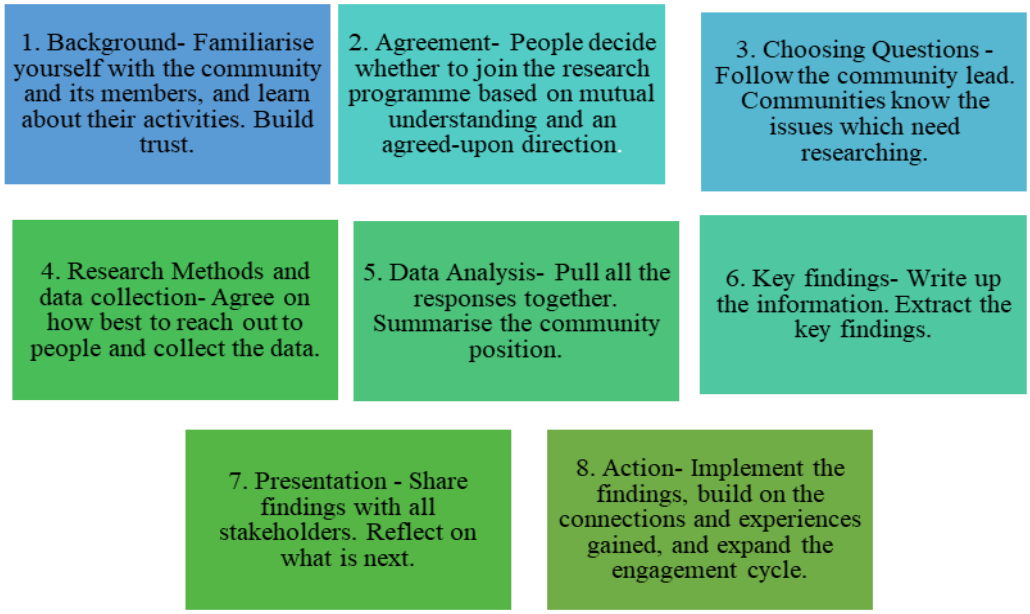
Methods

Approach and Design

The PAR design was fundamentally inductive and iterative, ensuring that data collection and analysis were driven organically by the 20 participants lived experiences rather than pre-determined variables. To structure this collaborative process, we drew upon the PAR stages outlined by Oenga et al. (2023) as a flexible, orienting framework rather than a prescriptive deductive model (see Figure 1). This guided us through a participatory journey, helping to facilitate the perspectives of students without constraining the bottom-up emergence of themes. PAR aligns with social constructivism, which views knowledge as constructed through social interaction, dialogue, and shared experiences (Bou & Sales, 2024).

Figure 1

The 8 Stages of Participatory Action Research



The process began by sharing an invitation via university communication platforms, inviting interested individuals to take part in narrative interviews. Although no formal needs analysis was carried out, discussions identified common barriers, including poverty, financial difficulties, and mental well-being issues. This collaborative phase of the research study was designed to tackle student challenges, promote critical reflection through joint efforts, and to build trust (step 1). Consensus confirmed the students' voluntary participation (Step 2). Initial reflection questions were prepared to guide the interviews (e.g., How do Black African students understand mental well-being?). Once these guiding questions were established (Step 3), we collaboratively developed a data collection plan centred on narrative interviews and photo-voice to capture students lived realities (aligning with Step 4). Acting as co-researchers, five students actively documented and shared their experiences of inequality and mental well-being. This visual and narrative data directly informed our joint data analysis (Step 5), where students played a vital role in identifying core themes and ensuring accurate cultural interpretation. Following this, the synthesised findings were shared back with the group for validation (Steps 6 and 7). Moving from reflection to implementation (Step 8), students utilised these validated findings to propose Afrocentric, culturally relevant coping strategies such as Ubuntu and collective healing practices to drive ongoing institutional engagement and student advocacy.

All data collected during the research process were transcribed and coded. They were subsequently analysed using a thematic approach. The analysis focused on the primary research question: *How do Black African students at Institution A and Institution B understand mental well-being and structural inequalities from a participatory Afrocentric perspective?* A thematic qualitative text analysis, as described by Naeem et al. (2023), was followed. This involved highlighting key passages in memos, reflections, and photo-voice submissions.

Trustworthiness

The broader participant pool consisted of students who contributed data through narrative interviews and Facebook submissions (such as photo-voice reflections). From this larger group, five students actively served as co-researchers, playing a central role in data interpretation and decision-making. Trustworthiness and ethical integrity were established across all

these groups through continuous engagement, reflexivity, and rigorous participant validation. Throughout the research, the primary researcher remained acutely aware of their positionality as a Black researcher within the university environment. By employing deliberate self-disclosure, the primary researcher actively challenged traditional, hierarchical power dynamics between researcher and participant. This approach fostered mutual respect and cultivated a culturally safe space, empowering both the broader participants and the co-researchers to openly discuss sensitive topics such as mental well-being, institutional alienation, and identity. Furthermore, the risk of interpretive bias was actively mitigated through the co-researchers. Open dialogue, regular check-ins, and collaborative data interpretation with these five co-researchers ensured that the finalised themes authentically reflected the collective lived realities of the student body, rather than the primary researcher's preconceptions, ultimately reinforcing mutual trust and ethical accountability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (Ethics Protocol Number: EDU207/23). All participants signed written consent forms, and their identities were anonymised to maintain confidentiality. Guided by PAR principles and an African-centred approach, this research used purposive and voluntary sampling (Saunders, 2012). This method helped achieve the research study's aim and supported emancipation by emphasising participant agency. Recruitment was conducted through an open call shared via digital flyers on official student platforms and on Facebook groups related to Institution A and Institution B. The flyer targeted African students, including undergraduates and postgraduates aged 18 and above from the Faculty of Humanities at the relevant universities (Institution A and B), inviting them to participate and clearly outlining the research study's aim.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are organised into three interconnected sections based on the triangulated data sources. First, it draws on verbatim accounts from 20 student participants collected during narrative interviews, offering detailed, firsthand accounts of their lived experiences. Second, it includes anonymous student submissions from university-affiliated Facebook groups, providing insights into the collective and informal discourses that shape student experiences in digital spaces. Third, it features photo-voice reflections from five of the 20 interviewed students who actively served as the study's co-researchers. Their contributions provide visual and interpretive representations of the participants' realities. Together, these three data sources provide a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon, highlighting both individual and collective perspectives in the analysis

Theme 1: Inequalities in Access and University Readiness

Participants from rural and township backgrounds emphasised the systemic challenges they face when entering university. The transition to higher education varies from person to person. Students from under-resourced schools noted that their peers from wealthier backgrounds are better prepared to navigate university systems, particularly in technology, academics, and social skills. Sesona from Institution A and Charmaine from Institution B vividly described this inequality.

"*Coming from a system where some people didn't have resources, they were exposed to a certain way of living. For example, someone who is not accustomed to eating in a dining hall, using a fork and knife, and so on, may find themselves in a situation*

where this is required. For example, if I think about the resident system at Institution A, that was, you know, your traditional English way of living." (Sesona, Institution A, Undergraduate)

"Students struggle to get the resources they need to advance their academic performance. This leads to many students missing opportunities presented to them due to a lack of funding and struggling to find accommodation." (Maketa, Institution A, Undergraduate)

Figure 2 below highlights the challenges faced by Black African students at both institutions.

Figure 2

Posts on Students Facebook Pages, Submitted Anonymously



Universities should support young Africans in achieving their goals, as this is vital for reducing poverty and restoring human dignity (Walker, 2024). However, students often conceal their disadvantaged backgrounds in environments designed to uplift them. Photographs reveal disparities in initial conditions and the systemic issues that sustain these inequalities. According to Bazana and Mogotsi (2017), HWU frequently fosters cultures that disconnect African students from their cultural heritage, language, traditions, and self-esteem, thereby affecting their sense of identity (Baker, 2023; Clayton, 2020; Cox, 2020).

As Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023) emphasise, students from disadvantaged backgrounds often face financial hardship before university due to limited household resources. Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023) demonstrates how financial, cultural, and epistemological inequalities shape students' experiences at South African universities. These interconnected disparities create a sense of exclusion and disconnection that hampers academic success and psychological well-being (Barker et al., 2024). Financial difficulties, such as delays in NSFAS disbursements, high textbook costs, and unexpected expenses, are significant issues that cause ongoing financial stress and greatly affect students' mental well-being in higher education (Shezi et al., 2025).

Drawing on decolonial theory, scholars such as Mignolo (2021) argue that this form of exclusion sustains coloniality in education by prioritising Western knowledge systems and marginalising non-Western perspectives. Reclaiming African identity and cultural frameworks is essential to achieving educational justice and fostering restorative healing (Smith, 2020). Afrocentricity serves as both a theoretical and emancipatory tool, reimagining the university as a space that embraces diverse epistemologies rather than merely promoting assimilation (Sebola & Mogoboya, 2020). Despite national initiatives aimed at promoting change, students experience dissonance between their cultural identities and the dominant Eurocentric norms governing knowledge, behaviour, and communication within the university setting (Folabi & Jita, 2025).

Theme 2: Reframing Mental Well-being through an Afrocentric Lens

This research study highlights a clear difference between African students' perceptions of mental well-being and how university mental health services define it. Participants described mental well-being not only as the absence of illness or a means of coping, but as a holistic state that encompasses social, spiritual, cultural, and communal aspects (DiClemente-Bosco et al., 2024). This is significant because, as Hansen et al. (2021) observe, students' cultural beliefs shape their attitudes

towards and understanding of mental well-being and related interventions. Students often associate well-being with the capacity to face challenges while remaining in harmony with their community, culture, and spirituality. For example, Msizi from Institution A and Brown from Institution B described mental well-being as:

"*It is about being able to deal with challenges as they arise, without letting them affect how you interact with others or everything else around you. That is my understanding of mental well-being.*" (Msizi, Institution A, Undergraduate)

"*Mental health is not just an individual issue. Ubuntu, it's not an individual issue but a community one. Healing should include connection to culture, nature, spirituality, and family. It takes a whole village to raise a child, essentially."* (Brown, Institution B, Undergraduate)

These findings underscore the need for further research into the cultural dimensions of mental health. As Adebayo et al. (2024) and Pretorius and Moonsamy (2020) note, cultural beliefs, values, and practices shape how people perceive and respond to mental well-being issues. In many African communities, mental health is viewed through spiritual or communal lenses, with conditions such as depression often regarded as spiritual imbalances or curses (Bwire, 2024). These influences help shape help-seeking behaviour; students from rural or traditional backgrounds tend to prefer elders, healers, or religious leaders to formal mental well-being services (Lannin et al., 2020). The research study emphasises the urgent need for mental health professionals in higher education to develop cultural competence and to understand how socio-cultural contexts, identity, and worldviews shape students' experiences.

Bosire et al. (2022) emphasise that socio-spiritual beliefs, practices, and spirituality are essential to healing beyond biomedical methods. Participants attributed illness to cultural or spiritual causes and found prayer and spiritual remedies, such as "church water", helpful for cleansing, stress relief, and well-being. This aligns with Afrocentric scholars such as Asante (2020b), who argue that African self-concepts are rooted in the collective, emphasising cultural reclamation and community. Conversely, Eurocentric mental health models in higher education often overlook this aspect, failing to address the needs of African students (Bantjes, 2024). Students' perspectives on mental well-being challenge Western individualism, highlighting community, spirituality, culture, and relationships.

Theme 3: Institutional Responses and their Limitations

Research highlights significant mental health challenges and inadequate support within South African higher education institutions (Namakula & Ndaba, 2024). Despite the availability of support services, students' express dissatisfaction, describing the responses as generic and impersonal. Services such as counselling are constrained by a Western-oriented framework that does not adequately reflect the lived realities of African students (Mohangi & Olivier, 2023). This disparity reduces the effectiveness of support mechanisms, compounded by resource constraints and cultural mismatches. Brown from Institution B reflected on his experience, stating:

"*I go to therapy as well, and sometimes I can just tell that the person sitting across from me doesn't truly understand what I'm going through. You can see it in their face, in their responses, even in the way they speak. Sometimes I feel like I'm the one who's wrong for even saying how I feel. You don't feel heard or seen*." (Brown, Institution B, Undergraduate)

Similarly, Ziyanda from Institution B explained:

"*It would help if the counsellors had a better understanding of the socio-economic struggles many of us face. The long waiting periods to see a counsellor make it hard to get timely support when you're in crisis."* (Ziyanda, Institution B, Undergraduate)

These reflections emphasise the isolating and culturally insensitive aspects of mental well-being services that struggle to build trust among students. A clear policy gap is evident. Despite organisational assertions of a commitment to well-being and inclusion, implementation often overlooks the obstacles faced by African students (Tavares, 2024). There is limited awareness of how intersecting inequalities, such as language, race, class, and culture, affect mental well-being. As a result, interventions

tend to be superficial and reactive rather than systemic and preventative. This aligns with findings by Adebayo et al. (2024) and Pretorius and Moonsamy (2020), who demonstrate that cultural beliefs influence perceptions of mental illness and help-seeking, highlighting the need for culturally competent care.

Figure 3 shows students facing struggles.

Figure 3

Photo-voice Reflections: Demonstrating the Inequality and its Implications



Brown from Institution B explains this image in their own words:

"*I write this letter as a student deeply aware of the visible and invisible struggles many of us face within the university environment. As I reflect on our daily experiences, captured even in the seemingly ordinary moments depicted in the attached images, I am reminded that beneath the surface of academic life lie deep challenges that often go unnoticed. In one image, a student stands alone (I taking the photo) with his head hanging low, weighed down by the academic pressure. A world that continues to move regardless of individual struggles. This moment still speaks volumes. It mirrors the isolation many of us feel when battling financial pressure, academic expectations, and mental fatigue. Accessing resources such as textbooks, safe study spaces, or even a stable internet connection is a privilege, not a given, for many. In the same image, we can also see the westernisation of umhlaba, no longer natural, free, and wild, but cultivated. Furthermore, guided, the trees and shrubs are no longer allowed to grow where they will. If they did, they would be cut and discarded, signifying how the university standards assume us to settle in with the Western ideology and not be African to the fullest extent*" (Brown, Institution A, Undergraduate)

Brown's image depicts a peaceful corner of campus where bricks meet red soil and are bordered by a kerb. In the shadow on the pavement, a faint outline of a person and the bowed head of their friend are visible, with their bodies still. This silence, bathed in the golden light of late afternoon, symbolises a pause amid academic chaos, reflecting Brown's idea of "*the visible and invisible struggles many of us face*." Brown emphasises how the university often overlooks these personal struggles. As Fomunyam (2019) notes, South African higher education faces numerous challenges that universities have grappled with for two decades.

Theme 4: Coping, Resilience, and Collective Practices

Despite inequalities, disconnection, and limited support, students demonstrated resilience by developing a range of coping strategies, including healthy ones such as exercise, community involvement, and routines, as well as less healthy options such as substance use and withdrawal (Broman & Wernekinck, 2024). Sesona's from Institution A reflection on alcohol use as a way to cope with financial stress and loneliness illustrates how a lack of support can lead to unhealthy behaviours. Blows and

Isaacs (2022) emphasise that substance use among South African university students, including alcohol and cannabis, is common and linked to mental well-being issues. Sesona remarked:

"*You find yourself resorting to things to numb the stress, like turning to wine from time to time, just to cope. You may not get heavily intoxicated, but you take it to calm yourself, to get through a few pages of reading, to make some progress, even if it is just two pages.*" (Sesona, Institution A, Undergraduate.)

On the other hand, Xhuma from Institution A mentioned how gym sessions helped them relax and maintain balance, which is an essential coping mechanism, especially when mental health support seemed out of reach or did not quite meet their needs:

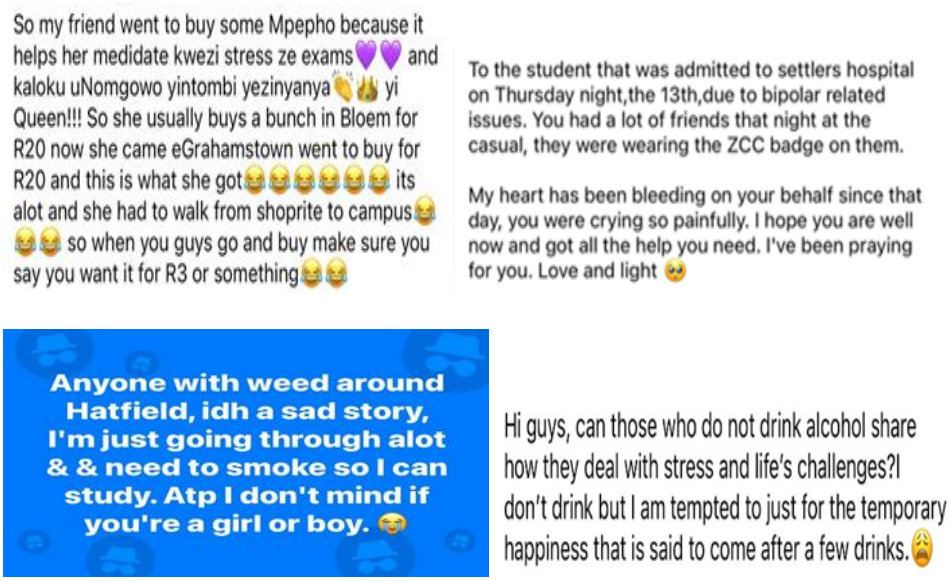
"*My primary coping mechanism was physical activity, going to the gym, playing sports, and staying involved in various activities. As an undergraduate, what worked for me was keeping myself as busy as possible.*" (Xhuma, Institution A, Postgraduate.)

However, it was within collective and participatory spaces that the true depth of Afrocentric resilience became most evident. Prayer groups, study circles, and informal peer-mentoring networks emerged as safe spaces where students could express themselves openly, seek guidance, and build a shared sense of identity and purpose (Bosire et al., 2022). These groups were not solely academic or religious; they embodied deeply rooted Afrocentric practices of communal care, shared healing, and interdependence (Gallego, 2020).

The following social media posts highlight the effective coping strategies employed by students at both institutions, despite the universities' insufficient promotion of well-being.

Figure 4

Coping Mechanisms of Students: Posts on Students Facebook Pages, Submitted Anonymously



From an Afrocentric perspective, the self is interconnected with social and spiritual networks (Asante, 2025). Students reject the isolated, biomedical approach to university mental health services, which they find alienating and culturally disconnected (Read & Harper, 2022). Instead, they utilise African-centred methods, including connection, ritual, prayer, rhythm, and care, which are integrated into daily life. This aligns with this study's participatory approach, in which students are active co-creators of healing spaces (Ravi et al., 2024), designing environments rooted in their experiences, cultural knowledge, and community wisdom.

Our approach aligns with Afrocentricity, both as a methodological and an ideological perspective, recognising African students as active participants with voices, agency, and epistemic authority (Asante, 2020). From an Afrocentric standpoint, students are not merely 'clients' of a Westernised mental well-being system; they are co-creators of knowledge rooted in cultural, historical, and spiritual contexts that should inform how universities address mental well-being (Ravi et al., 2024). The students' narratives in this research study challenge dominant frameworks that define mental well-being primarily through Eurocentric, individualised, and clinical lenses (Kirkbride et al., 2024). These frameworks often overlook collective suffering, historical trauma, and communal aspects of healing central to African worldviews (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022).

Theme 5: Afrocentric and Participatory Pathways Forward

The findings of this research study highlight the need to rethink how mental well-being support is delivered in African universities. Central to this is the promotion of Afrocentric and inclusive methods that are culturally appropriate, community-focused, and grounded in students lived experiences. Participants consistently noted that current university mental well-being services, despite good intentions, often lack flexibility, diminish students' sense of empowerment, and seem disconnected from students' cultural backgrounds. The dominant Western medical models, which focus on individual diagnosis, pathology, and clinical separation, do not align with many African students' perceptions of mental well-being, which tend to emphasise relationships, community, and spirituality (Kebaetse et al., 2024). For example, participants from Institution B shared the following feedback:

"*The university should provide culturally competent counselling services and mentorship programs that reflect students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. Hiring more counsellors who understand African cultural contexts and the socio-economic realities of students would improve the quality of mental health support*." (Charmaine, Institution B, Postgraduate.)

"*There was once a small student-led mental health talk in my residence, where we sat in a circle and talked in Setswana and Zulu. No counsellors, just students supporting each other. That felt more helpful than any formal session I've attended. We felt heard and understood*." (Lira, Institution B, Undergraduate.)

Therefore, a hybrid model must be developed that integrates evidence-based institutional care with Afrocentric principles, including Ubuntu, spiritual and cultural healing, oral storytelling, and community resilience (Denyse et al., 2022). This model would not replace existing services; instead, it would enhance them by offering culturally sensitive options that reflect the diverse identities of students (Sithole, 2022). For example, incorporating traditional healers, multilingual counselling staff, cultural mentors, and sacred spaces for rituals such as ukuphahla could complement psychological services, fostering a holistic healing ecosystem rather than a standard service delivery model (Mkhize, 2016).

Bojuwoye (2013) emphasises the significance of ancestral spirit beliefs and their influence. In indigenous cultures, strong emotional bonds with ancestors shape behaviour, well-being, and lifestyles. Students actively engage in their own healing by forming informal support networks, exemplifying Afrocentric approaches to knowledge and healing (Shange & Ross, 2022). These practices are vital cultural lifelines that should be incorporated into university mental well-being strategies. Addressing mental well-being from an Afrocentric perspective involves prioritising students' epistemologies rooted in their heritage, spirituality, language, and collective responsibility (Olaniyan & Hayes, 2022). This approach shifts the focus from top-down policies to storytelling and the affirmation of indigenous knowledge (Muller, 2025). The following social media posts highlights this.

Figure 5

Posts on Students Facebook Pages, Submitted Anonymously



Students reaffirm Afrocentric worldviews and indigenous spiritual practices as empowering, holistic ways of addressing mental distress. In contexts where institutional mental well-being services are perceived as impersonal and culturally disconnected, students create spaces for affirmation, spirituality, and collective care (Bantjes et al., 2023). The posts demonstrate that these practices support individuals and redefine well-being. For example, a group for "*spiritually gifted individuals*" meets regularly to connect. Many students associate mental health with spiritual identity and ancestors (Van der Zeijst et al., 2021). Afrocentric approaches view the self holistically, unlike Western models that regard mental health as personal (Wells-Wilbon, 2021). By emphasising spirituality, students view healing as relational, ancestral, and ritualistic, rooted in traditions that regard distress as part of a broader existential experience.

Recommendations and Limitations

Given the research study's participatory nature, it required additional financial resources. Because the analysis took place at Institutions A and B, funding became a major limitation. As a result, we had to conduct much of our knowledge creation online. Research from this research study indicates that African students often perceive the mental well-being services at Institutions A and B as generic, impersonal, and disconnected from their everyday experiences. Although university counselling centres and wellness programmes are accessible, students often describe these services as overly clinical, culturally detached, and lacking an understanding of the social, economic, and historical factors that shape their emotional and psychological challenges. For many participants, especially those from rural and township backgrounds, these services do not adequately address complex issues such as academic pressure, racial marginalisation, financial insecurity, cultural dissonance, and the long-term effects of systemic inequality. Based on these findings, we suggest the following recommendations:

1. Develop culturally sensitive mental health services: Universities must reevaluate their mental well-being support systems to better reflect the daily lives, languages, and cultural backgrounds of Black African students. This involves employing counsellors who speak multiple languages, integrating traditional knowledge into therapeutic approaches, and incorporating community-based healing practices such as group discussions, prayer sessions, and storytelling into their care.
2. Introduce Afrocentric teaching methods and epistemologies into the curriculum: The curriculum and institutional culture should be rooted in African knowledge systems, languages, and values. This involves decolonising teaching and learning practices, incorporating African literature and philosophy, and recognising the validity of students' identities within the academic environment to foster a sense of belonging and mental well-being.

3. Implementing participatory mental health frameworks: Universities should collaborate with students, especially those from underrepresented groups, to co-develop mental health support. By employing participatory methods such as photovoice, narrative interviews, and peer-led projects, they can develop more inclusive support systems and ensure that interventions are tailored to the specific context and informed by student feedback.
4. Addressing structural inequalities through policy reform: Universities and the Department of Higher Education and Training need to re-examine their policies on financial aid, housing, food security, and access to learning resources. These underlying conditions have a direct impact on student well-being and academic performance. To tackle this, policies should prioritise equity for students from rural areas, townships, and historically disadvantaged backgrounds.
5. Provide staff training on Afrocentric and CRT frameworks: Lecturers, counsellors, and student support staff should undertake training in Afrocentric theory and CRT to develop a deeper understanding of the historical and social contexts that shape the experiences of African students. This training will promote a more empathetic, anti-racist, and culturally aware institutional culture that supports student mental health more holistically.

Conclusion

By employing a participatory Afrocentric approach, the research study successfully broke down the traditional researcher-participant divide, encouraging co-researchers to reflect on their lived experiences through visual storytelling, interviews, and narratives. Drawing on African knowledge systems such as Ubuntu, the research offers an alternative to Western-centric mental health views. The level of participation in the research reflects an ongoing challenge faced by students in higher education. Our findings show that African students encounter significant structural inequalities across financial, social, cultural, and epistemological dimensions. These challenges extend beyond economic issues to include mental and emotional stress. Participants felt alienated from institutional expectations that did not mirror their lived experiences. Suppressing their cultural identities to conform to Western norms worsened their emotional health, leading to disconnection and a loss of their sense of identity. Students felt marginalised and internalised this disconnection, which compounded feelings of inferiority and emotional exhaustion.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no activities, responsibilities, or services related to this work that could create conflicts of interest or compromise their integrity.

Author Contributions

The authors of this work state that all members duly fulfilled the functions of co-authorship. The co-author is the PhD supervisor, who oversaw every aspect of the work, from proposal writing and data collection to the write-up of the whole thesis and this specific article.

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