

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

Faculty of Community and Health Services

Title: Exploring Postgraduate Psychology Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Empathy in an Online Learning Environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Student name: Amy-Jean Viljoen

Student number: 3850739

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Supervisor: Dr Tracey-Ann Adonis, PhD

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DECLARATION

I, Amy-Jean Viljoen (3850739), declare that the qualitative study, Exploring Postgraduate Psychology Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Empathy in an Online Learning Environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic, is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Amy-Jean Viljoen

July 2023

Signature



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Above all, glory and honour belong to God, who has a plan and purpose for my life.

“To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.”

Jude 1:25

ABSTRACT

Empathy is conceptualised as the human ability to feel, and also to navigate, various social situations successfully. Empathy, as a construct, is often defined as having both affective and cognitive aspects, however, researchers and scholars alike, have yet to agree upon a single approach, as to how empathy develops. Thus far, the literature has discussed empathy as a social skill that can be learned over time. However, there is limited research regarding the impact that the physical environment has, on empathy development across cultures and contexts.

Hence, this study aims to address the current debates within the literature regarding the construct of empathy, and how it develops, within a multicultural context. The multicultural context in which this study was conducted is of utmost importance, as this particular environment, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, did not allow for social connection and interaction. Therefore, how empathy develops under these limited social conditions remained the focus of this study.

An exploratory research design suited this qualitative study, in that the data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to analyse the data in this study. To enhance the data analysis process, the ATLAS.ti 23 Scientific Software, which is an electronic qualitative data management tool, was employed to assist with the data analysis component of the study. The researcher remained in a reflective praxis throughout this study and documented their experiences and reflections, through journal writing and de-briefing/supervision sessions.

In terms of ethical considerations; strict confidentiality protocols were instilled from the beginning of the study, whereby the researcher protected the information and details of

each participant. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the Higher Education Institution (HEI).

This study found that empathy is not easily defined within multicultural contexts, as empathy is a multi-faceted and context-specific social skill or ability that is based on learned experiences. Additionally, it was found that empathy, in a multicultural context, should be based on collectivist ideas, as empathy does not predominately rely on genetic factors, but rather on the environment which facilitates the development of social skills necessary for future healthcare professionals. Another major finding was that the lack of social interaction during the period of online learning intensified feelings of social isolation and disconnection among the majority of postgraduate psychology students, in this sample. It is clear that this specific area of research requires further exploration, hence the following key recommendations are; (1) more Western-based constructs should be de-bunked and re-defined within multicultural contexts, and (2) it could be useful to explore the linkage between past experiences (rooted in historically disadvantaged communities) and empathy development.

Keywords: Empathy, social connectedness, online learning, face-to-face learning, COVID-19 Pandemic, postgraduate psychology students, qualitative, ATLAS.ti 23.

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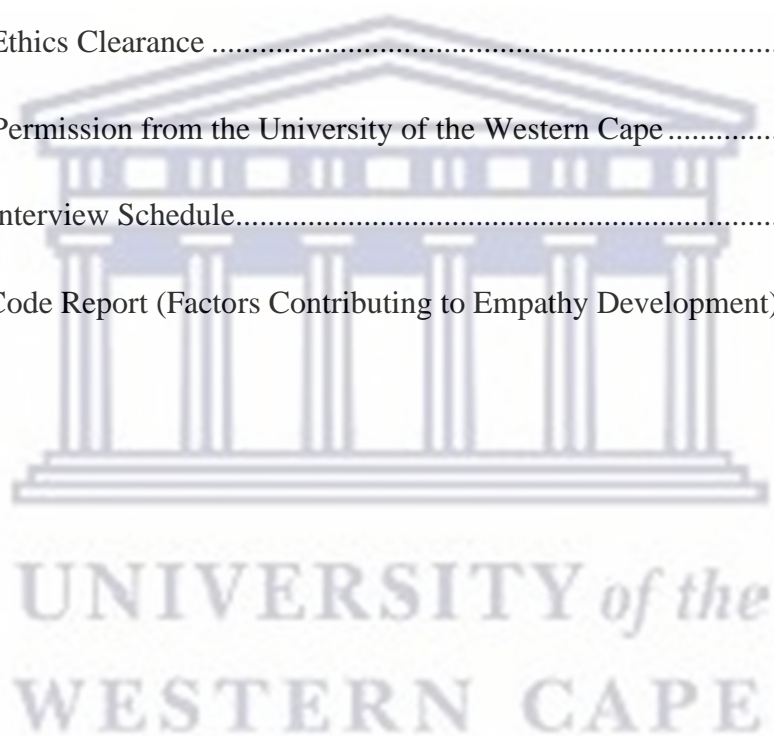
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELT	Experiential Learning Theory
ERL	Emergency Remote Learning
HPCSA	Health Professions Council of South Africa
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HSSREC	Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis



CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Empathy is conceptualised as the human ability to feel, and also to navigate, various social situations successfully (Babar et al., 2018). Empathy originated as a prosocial behaviour, whereby individuals were encouraged to be more attentive toward others in their environment (Duncan et al., 2016; McDonald & Messinger, 2011). In modern society, the paradigm of empathy, among social science researchers, has shifted from depicting empathy as an inheritable personality trait to being conceptualised, more so, as a social skill that can be learnt and taught (Cuff et al., 2016). Empathy, as a construct, is often defined as having both affective and cognitive aspects (Cuff et al., 2016), however, researchers and scholars alike, have yet to agree upon a single approach, as to how empathy develops.

Scientists believe that empathy development can be attributed to both; internal/genetics, and external/proximal factors (such as parenting/upbringing and culture) (McDonald & Messinger, 2011; Silke et al., 2018). However, there are constant social and scientific debates as to which factors of human life (internal/genetics or external/proximal) have more influence over empathy development. Therefore, this study aims to address empathy development through a social community psychology lens, by developing an understanding of individual experiences of empathy in a multicultural context.

Within an academic setting, empathy can also act as a positive mediator in complex educational relationships, such as the teacher-student relationship, through the guidance of the educator in perspective-taking and sharing emotional states (Sarki & Anjum, 2020). The empathetic role of the educator, in the teacher-student relationship, often leads to better learning and academic outcomes, as well as the impartation of encouragement to the receiver,

i.e., student/learner (Sarki & Anjum, 2020). Therefore, when the COVID-19 Pandemic was declared a global health crisis on the 30th of January 2020, the immediate closure of educational facilities, such as schools and universities, forced students to proceed with educational programmes in an online capacity (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). The desktop literature around the development of empathy, as a social skill, does not focus on how empathy develops in a multicultural context, especially during a global pandemic that did not allow for social connection and interaction.

The most common type of learning, whereby social interaction is limited, is known as online or remote learning. Online learning is not a new approach to learning, as, in recent years, new advancements in technology have revolutionised the ability for students to engage with the curriculum, without in-person interactions (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). However, online learning can potentially limit the development of empathy formation among students/learners, due to the prevention of social integration, at a racial, cultural and ethnic level (Sarki & Anjum, 2020). The concern is that by limiting social interaction, cultural groups remain isolated, which can hinder the possibility of a student finding commonalities at a deeper level with peers, which would have spontaneously occurred in face-to-face learning environments (Sarki & Anjum, 2020).

Cultural diversity in South African university environments facilitates an essential learning space for students to develop a deeper understanding of cultural differences among peers, which would naturally result in the ability to socially communicate, connect and interact with a variety of individuals (Matthews & Van Wyk, 2018). This is known as the hidden curriculum, which can be defined as “an implicit curriculum that expresses and represents attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours, which are conveyed or communicated without aware intent; it is conveyed indirectly by words and actions that are parts of the life of everyone in a

society” (Alsubaie, 2015, p. 125). Therefore, the hidden curriculum is as important as the formal curriculum being offered to students within educational contexts.

The second concern is that not only are students socially isolated from each other, but are also isolated from support structures, such as lecturers, who are vital in facilitating empathetic development in the learning space (Hurst et al., 2013). According to Moodley (2022), the fact that student populations have been isolated from support structures at Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), during the COVID-19 Pandemic, resulted in a type of learning ‘paralysis’. This can be linked back to the hidden curriculum, as subliminal messages that are conveyed by educational staff, lecturers, teachers, superintendents, and administrators, directly impact how students/learners approach social interactions and connections.

Overall, this lack of social interaction severely affected the running of tertiary educational health science faculties, as students could not participate in previously scheduled practical sessions, and forfeited the opportunity to gain physical experiences needed for their respective human-related courses (Moudatsou et al., 2020). Therefore, there was an urgency for universities to re-design health profession-based courses and programmes to accommodate skill development, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic (Baber, 2021). More recently, universities have been slowly introducing hybrid education systems which include face-to-face lectures, as well as online lectures (Mishra et al., 2020). At present, interactional skill development has thus been largely facilitated in an online learning environment, such as online interviewing, presentations, and supervision.

Against this brief background, this study aimed to unpack the concepts of empathy and social connectedness, by exploring the development of empathy within an online learning environment, as it relates to educational staff and peer interaction, as well as the future implications for students entering into human-related health professions.

1.1.1. Operationalisation of Key Concepts

The key concepts outlined in this section aimed to provide conceptual understandings of commonly used terminology, in this study.

A **construct** is a theoretical abstraction that serves as a label for sets of behaviours that appear to ‘go together’ in nature (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2005, p. 73).

Empathy, in a multicultural context, can be conceptualised as, “the human ability to feel for the other person in distress, and thus direct, altruistic helping behaviour to other human beings. As a by-product, it also allows a person to gain intuitive knowledge of their social situation and gives him/her the ability to act successfully in that social situation” (Babar et al., 2018, p. 172).

Social connectedness is seen as essential to human well-being and optimal functioning, as it depends on the relationship between individuals (Bailey et al., 2018).

Social interaction refers to, “the process of constructing a meaningful exchange of information and ideas amongst more than two people” (Baber, 2021, p. 160).

Social isolation refers to “having inadequacies of social interactions, an absence of contact and connection with people, relatives, and companions or even with acquaintances on a micro-level, and with the wide society on a macro-level” (Masoom, 2016, p. 241).

Online learning refers to “education that takes place over the internet” (Sadiku et al., 2018, p. 6).

Human skills and capital refers to “the stock of economically productive human capabilities — encompasses knowledge, health, skills, entrepreneurial talent, determination and other human traits that lead to success in endeavours” (Daniel, 2000, p. 102).

The **hidden curriculum** is “acknowledged as the socialisation process of schooling” (Kentli, 2009, p. 83).

The **COVID-19 Pandemic** has affected the everyday lives of individuals worldwide, due to the rapidly spreading coronavirus, which is showcased through flu-like symptoms of; fever, severe coughing and shortness of breath (Long et al., 2022).

1.2. Problem Statement

Research is available around the individual components encompassed in the overarching topic of this study, i.e., the definitions of empathy, postgraduate psychology students’ challenges with online learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the perceptions of empathy that students experience within online learning environments. However, there is a dearth in the academic literature around the perceptions and experiences of empathy in the context of online learning, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Therefore, this study aims to understand how this online learning environment has affected students’ development of empathy and social connectedness, during a time of social isolation. It is also important to review and explore the educational systems put in place (i.e., the online curriculum and expectations placed on students), as well as the student’s ability to learn social skills (such as empathy) whilst studying in an online learning environment.

Additionally, the COVID-19 Pandemic, being a relatively new field of research, provides an opportunity for researchers to review and re-evaluate past theories and concepts, such as the construct of empathy, as well as to understand the possible paradigm shifts in the conceptualisation of empathy amongst students, during a global crisis (Gilmore et al., 2020). Therefore, by conducting this study, the hope is that more information can be revealed to assist in understanding the complexities of the research topic under investigation, as well as contribute to the understanding of empathy development in a specific educational context.

1.3. Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore postgraduate psychology students' perceptions and experiences of empathy in an online learning environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.

1.4. Objectives

The objectives of the study are;

- 1.) To explore postgraduate psychology students' perceptions of empathy, in a multicultural South African context prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 2.) To understand how postgraduate psychology students experienced empathy in an online learning environment where social interaction was minimal due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 3.) To establish how postgraduate psychology students, feel their development of empathetic growth has been impacted by online learning, post the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 4.) To explore postgraduate psychology students' perceived importance of developing empathy, post a global pandemic.

1.5. Rationale for the study

Empathy is a constantly changing construct and skill, as it speaks to complex emotions that are inherently culturally specific (Goldstein & Michaels, 2021). Hence, empathy which was understood from predominately Western ideologies, as a personality trait, has taken on multiple meanings in multicultural contexts (Zhu, 2011). Therefore, by conducting research in this field of psychology, new perspectives on the existing construct of empathy and social connectedness can be explored, both in terms of the multicultural South African context and within the theoretical framework of experiential 'online' learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic. For this research, postgraduate psychology students in the health sciences, require the development of empathy to succeed academically, and to become well-rounded future

healthcare professionals as outlined by the regulatory bodies including the graduate attributes of the higher education institutions. Against this backdrop and rationale, the following research study was undertaken.

1.6. Theoretical Framework

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) was selected as the theoretical framework in this study, in terms of its linkage to the introductory section, literature review and methodology, of this research. The ELT framework is the golden thread that ties all aspects of the study together as it filters into the data collection, data analysis, and discussion sections of this study. Thus, the ELT framework provides the foundation for this study based on postgraduate psychology students' perceptions and experiences of empathy in an online learning environment amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic, which will be discussed in the following sections.

1.6.1. Defining Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) forms part of the superordinate concept of Experiential Education, which refers to “hands-on experiences and reflection based on experiences as a mechanism for student learning” (Dobbs-Oats et al., 2020, p. 57). ELT is a relatively modern theory founded on the principles of revolutionary social theorists, such as Dewey, Piaget, Lewin, Jung, Freire and Rogers, who emphasised the central role of social experiences and behaviour in human development (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). ELT is not a set of tools or techniques to provide students with a range of experiences but rather serves as a continuous and transformative process that shapes and changes students' understanding and interpretation of theory, beliefs, values and practice, in daily life (Bartle, 2015).

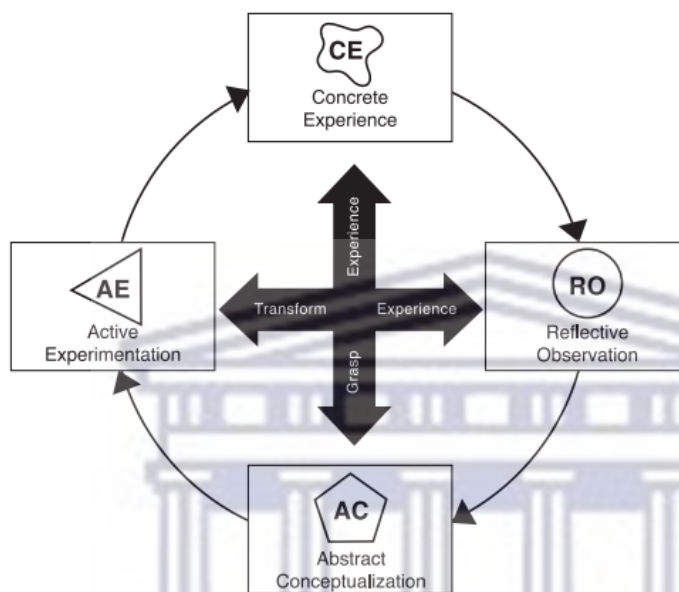
1.6.2. Experiential Learning Cycle

ELT is represented in a four-stage learning model/cycle that consists of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting (McCarthy, 2016). This model expects the learner to

continually choose which set of learning abilities to use in a given learning situation. This is due to the process of constructing knowledge involving creative tension among the four learning abilities (as seen in Figure 1), thus, the individual is forced to choose what works best in their particular situation or context (McCarthy, 2010; 2016).

Figure 1

Experiential Learning Cycle



Note. This model defines learning as the major process of human adaptation involving the whole individual. From “*Experiential learning theory as a guide for experiential educators in higher education*”, by A.Y. Kolb and D. A. Kolb, 2017, *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*, 1(1), p. 11.

1.6.3. Experiential Learning Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, students were forced to work in online learning environments (often within their homes), whereby limited social interaction in the online learning environment, prevented optimal learning as outlined by the ELT framework. Many ‘off-campus’ learning spaces were not suitable for students to develop necessary social skills.

For example, a lack of student mentorship could impact student behaviour and their level of engagement with peers within their particular field of study, as students might not have had opportunities to develop self-reflective and appropriate social skills. Additionally, evidence suggests that the classroom or learning environment is essential in fostering empathy skills, as social interactions posed by the hidden curriculum, and the actual course content are of equal importance to empathy development (Sarki & Anjum, 2020). Finally, evidence suggests that course material/content was easily transferrable to online platforms for students to engage with, however, the course content lacked transformation, innovation and integration of social skills (Dobbs-Oates et al., 2020). Cadosales (2021) adds to this by stating that, most educational institutions have resorted to asynchronous classes, which allowed students to access the course resources at any time, whereby lecture recordings were uploaded to the pre-determined online platform for easy access. This prevented students from learning the skills of time management, active listening, and class interaction, yet these students were expected to produce adequate academic outcomes (Zounek & Sudicky, 2013). Therefore, this study aims to explore how the postgraduate psychology student's experiences of online learning inform amendments and considerations to the tertiary educational curriculum, under similar pandemic conditions, in the future.

1.7. Thesis Organisation

This study comprises six chapters. **Chapter one** serves to introduce the topic by providing a background to the study, identifying the problem statement and explaining the rationale for conducting this study, as well as aims to outline and position the study in terms of the theoretical framework - Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). **Chapter two** provides an in-depth review of the available literature. The literature review serves to provide an overview of the available desktop research regarding the factors, debates and perspectives evident when discussing the development of empathy, and interrogating the linkage between empathy and

the COVID-19 Pandemic, in terms of student experiences and perceptions of online learning. It also serves to provide contextual information regarding empathy in a multicultural context, by reviewing the literature from a social community psychological lens. **Chapter three** provides a detailed account of the methodology used, with a clear description of the different methodological elements such as the design of the study, sampling techniques, the data collection process, and finally how the data was analysed. **Chapter four** is a presentation of the findings. This chapter presents the process of Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) for interpretations of the data that was collected. The **fifth chapter** presents a discussion. In this chapter, the findings and key themes are outlined, where the findings of the study showcase how the objectives of the study and the literature review are linked. The **sixth and final chapter** provides a conclusion, which will connect the entire study, by highlighting the limitations and recommendations for further research.



CHAPTER TWO

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides an overview of the desktop research related to empathy and social connectedness in general, with an emphasis on empathy development in terms of online learning in South African tertiary institutions and how the shift in learning environments during the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted social development. Furthermore, this literature review was constructed using ATLAS.ti 23, a qualitative data management software programme, as a tool for storing and evaluating the literature that applied to this topic, to provide an overview of the available information before the write-up process took place. At present, there is a dearth of academic literature that focuses on postgraduate students' perceptions and experiences of empathy in an online learning context. Therefore, by exploring the available literature, the goal was to have a better understanding and deeper insight into pertinent aspects of the topic under investigation, as well as to provide a contextual backdrop to make sense of the data that would emerge from this research.

2.1. Defining Empathy

The term empathy originated from German art historian and philosopher, Robert Vischer's definition of 'Einfühlung', as the ability of an individual to express feelings elicited by works of art, in 1873 (Dong et al., 2017). This definition was expanded on, by Edward Bradner Titchener, in 1909, who coined the term empathy as a process of humanising objects, of reading or feeling 'ourselves' into them (Dong et al., 2017). A few years prior to 1909, Sigmund Freud had begun using the term empathy to describe the psychodynamic process of putting oneself in another person's position (Kaluzeviciute, 2020).

This sparked the debate around the conceptualisation of empathy, which has existed ever since. According to Dong et al. (2017), psychologists such as Piaget stated that empathy

is a predominantly cognitive process, which was then challenged by George Herbert Mead who focused on the role-taking of empathy, as the key to social and ethical development amongst children. In modern society, specifically within the fields of psychology, anthropology, and philosophy, no clear definition of empathy has been agreed upon by academics to date (Saeri et al., 2018). While empathy, as a construct, has its roots in the clinical psychological arena, this study will unpack empathy from a different angle, by exploring empathy from a social community lens (Reiss, 2017; Sarki & Anjum, 2020).

From a psychosocial perspective, empathy is influenced and shaped by cultural codes, whereby these codes and values allow individuals to be trained or understand the emotions of other community members (Reiss, 2017). According to Sarki and Anjum (2020), empathy is dependent on the environment in which it develops, to the extent that, individuals of the same culture can connect better as they have commonalities that can bridge cultural divides and encourage deeper relationship buildings. Therefore, both, context and culture, impact the development of empathy, as many non-Western communities view empathy as a collectivist concept, that is expressed between community members, as a response to a communal understanding. Ultimately, social isolation can hinder the ability of individuals, in a multicultural context (such as South Africa) to find commonalities among different cultures, thus leading to a lack of empathy development across racial, ethnic, and culturally diverse groups (Masipa, 2021). This study aims to explore these multicultural definitions, perceptions, and experiences of empathy and social connectedness amongst diverse populations.

2.2. The Development of Empathy

Despite researchers and scientists not having reached a consensus as to the exact steps of empathy development, Hoffman (1996) alludes to the fact that emotive empathy is the foundation of human life, and as human beings grow and mature, it functions as a predominately cognitive process. However, the main idea is that, because children cannot

differentiate the concept of self from others, empathy is thus a taught and learned process that is established over time (Knafo & Uzefovsky, 2013). Due to a lack of scientific evidence, Hoffman's theory provides a baseline for researchers and scientists to question what factors are contributing to empathic development.

The most common factors contributing to an individual's development of empathy, agreed upon by researchers and scientists, are internal factors, such as genetics, personality, and temperament, whereas external factors mentioned in the desktop literature are limited to; parenting, culture, learning environments (such as the school context) and community engagement (which includes friends, and family relations) (Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978; Hoffman, 1996; Knafo & Uzefovsky, 2013; Leo, 2016; McDonald & Messinger, 2011; Woolrych et al., 2020). External factors affecting empathy development are under-researched and require further examination, particularly in multicultural contexts.

2.3. Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

This section of the literature review aims to showcase the various factors contributing to the development of empathy. The section pivots on the highly contentious nature versus nurture debate in health psychology, whereby social scientists have not reached a consensus as to how much of the individual's behaviour is based on natural factors, such as genetics and temperament, versus nurture factors, such as parenting, society, and culture (Eagly & Wood, 2013). The following section will explore how these various factors play a role in empathy development, based on the current academic literature.

2.3.1. Genetics

Studies on child development highlighted that in the first few days of birth, infants cry upon the stimulus of hearing other infants crying, which provides evidence that humans have a genetically inherited trait of mirroring and imitating others around them based on affective

or emotive response theory (De Waal & Preston, 2017; Hamlin, 2013; Heyes, 2018). From a neurodevelopmental point of view, autism (a neurodevelopmental disorder) is related to variations in the development of the human brain such as; neural growth, synaptic development and neuro-connectivity, which can impact the ability of infants to develop appropriate social skills (Chakrabarti & Baron-Cohen, 2013).

2.3.2. Personality

To assess the relationship between personality and empathy, the Big Five Personality Assessment is often used as it accounts for various aspects of personality. According to Doktorová et al. (2019), strong correlations were found between emotional intelligence and neuroticism, extraversion, kindness, conscientiousness, and moderate openness to experiences. Theorists such as Del Barrio et al. (2004); Kaufman (2014); Munro et al. (2005); Sala (2002); and, Watson and Morris (1991), have identified a significant relationship between empathy development and personality factors. Personality factors, such as being introverted or extroverted also influence how individuals empathise with others, for example, those who are extroverted will often engage in social interaction and develop more positive emotions (Radzi & Bolong, 2021). However, individuals with introverted personality traits still socialise with others but often withdraw due to personal factors (Srivastava et al., 2008).

2.3.3. Parenting

The early attachment between a primary caregiver and a child is an important factor in empathy development. According to Berkowitz and Gryth (1998), children learn empathic skills through the type of parenting style they experience from childhood. Children mimic and observe individuals within their immediate environment; thus, children often attempt to imitate their parents' behaviour.

Hence, parenting is a major contributor to empathy development in children and adolescents, as evidence suggests that parents or caregivers with high levels of warmth, support, and understanding of emotions, decrease the chances of their children developing anti-social behaviours (Schaffer et al., 2009). Alternatively, authoritarian, permissive, and disengaging parenting styles are reported to perpetuate punitive, hostile, and inconsistent household environments (Schaffer et al., 2009), which can be seen as risk factors for the development of anti-social behaviour in adulthood.

In South Africa, parents face an array of challenges including financial pressure, food insecurity, and access to health services due to the lack of resources in poverty-stricken areas (Ward et al., 2015). Mdluli and Dunga (2022) highlight that in South Africa there are more single-headed households, with mothering figures being the only caregivers. This brings into question the fact that children learn by observing their parental relationships, as single-headed households would present considerably different social interactions as opposed to 'normal' family structures whereby both biological parents are present.

2.3.4. Culture

In multicultural contexts, such as South Africa, individuals are exposed to and adopt a variety of cultures into their identity and thus could develop empathy across cultures (Meier & Hartell, 2009). However, there is limited in-depth literature on the role of culture within empathy development in unique and diverse contexts. This alludes to the individualism and collectivism debate, founded on Western and non-Western ideologies, whereby many South Africans of colour identify more within collectivist cultures that express feelings concerning harmony within group contexts (Yoon, 2014). Additionally, societal norms and values influence gender roles, in that, evidence suggests that males express less empathetic traits than females, as males are expected to focus on competition, whereas females are socialised to be

nurturing and warm by nature (Fivush et al., 2000; Fourie, 2015; Volbrecht, 2007). Therefore, there are many factors to consider when addressing empathy development, with the most recent being the COVID-19 Pandemic, in terms of social interaction, or the lack thereof.

2.4. Empathy Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In South Africa, the lockdown regulations were implemented on the 23rd of March 2020 where all public and community interaction was restricted (Hills & Eraso, 2021). Additionally, some individuals felt more anxious and expressed having social phobias, due to the social distancing mandate recommended by the government (Butovskaya et al., 2021). To afford university students the ability to continue their education, many educational institutions were forced to include online learning in the curriculum. This educational shift to online learning posed many challenges concerning access to resources and social connectedness among students and staff (Maatuk et al., 2022). Moodley (2022) described this type of 'forced online learning' as Emergency Remote Learning (ERL). This showcases the clear distinction between common online learning at specific Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), which is stipulated to be their primary learning technique, in comparison to the drastic shift in HEIs, which were mainly face-to-face, endured to implement online learning, without adequate preparation time (Moodley, 2022).

According to Baiano et al. (2022), students reported that their skill development was impacted, in that, (1) they could not see the faces of others (due to mask-wearing mandates), (2) they were forced to socially distance themselves from others, which prevented students from being attentive to social cues, (3) as well as the fact that social media became the main form of communication between students and educational staff (for example using WhatsApp).

2.4.1. Social Isolation and Empathy

Loneliness is negatively correlated with prosocial behaviour (Hu et al., 2020). According to Bekhet et al. (2008), loneliness can be defined as “an unwelcome feeling of a lack of companionship and a wish for interaction, different from that being experienced” (p. 2). In terms of human evolution, Hu et al. (2020) noted that the feeling of loneliness is based on the adaptive functioning of humans to enhance the survival of oneself and one’s offspring. Therefore, having social connections with others creates a sense of security and increases emotional well-being. This idea of social isolation will be further explored within this study, in terms of its relation to the online educational environment, during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

2.5. Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section of the literature review outlines how this shift in educational learning, from face-to-face to online learning, was seen as both a positive and negative experience for university students, as well as establishing the importance of the hidden curriculum in education.

2.5.1. Changing Learning Environments

Positive theory psychologists argue that an optimal learning environment brings about opportunities for social interaction to intensify unity among students (Shernoff, 2013). Cantor and Gomperts (2020) state that optimal learning environments should encompass five main characteristics that promote adequate learning growth among students. These are; (1) optimal learning environments should be produced and maintained through parental and community attention, collaboration, and partnerships; (2) there needs to be positive leadership and support from educators; (3) optimal learning environments should be learner-centred, and not centred around teachers or educators; (4) the learning environments should be user-friendly for the students, as well as comfortable and pleasant (5) and that there should be an ongoing

implementation of faculty management and comprehensive leadership strategies, as well as practical elements; such as class size and student administration (Cantor & Gomperts, 2020). While these characteristics provide the essence of what an optimal learning environment portrays, online learning has advantages and disadvantages in the South African context.

2.5.1.1. Advantages of Online Learning. There are several advantages to online learning, such as the flexibility to attend asynchronous classes, as the informal class setting allows students to access resources and material more efficiently, as well as promotes the skills of independent learning and time management (Al Rawashdeh et al., 2021). Both lecturing staff and students noted that by not having to be physically on university campuses, they have had more time to focus on the course content, as they do not have to worry about travelling, organising lift clubs, carrying textbooks and resources to-and-from campus, and dealing with other issues that might arise in traditional learning environments (Gilbert, 2015).

2.5.1.2. Disadvantages of Online Learning. According to Zounek and Sudicky (2013), many students have difficulties in terms of access to technology; such as computers, laptops, smartphones, tablets, and other devices. Additionally, students often express internet connectivity issues that emerge in online learning environments. Students also reported that they often feel overwhelmed and overloaded by the heightened workload and lack of communication via online learning platforms (Zounek & Sudicky, 2013). This can also lead to health-related problems, such as eye strain, back pain, and a lack of movement and blood circulation, due to being seated behind a computer or cellular device for extended periods (Zounek & Sudicky, 2013). Educators have added to this, by stating that rote/memory learning, in online learning environments, is not the best way to test student performance. This led to educators leaning more toward using application-based testing (i.e., case studies) to prevent dishonesty and cheating during examinations (Simpson, 2013). Simpson (2013) states that social isolation is the main negative element of online learning, as students often struggle

'behind the screen' and do not have the same level of engagement, as in face-to-face learning environments. According to Ivanec, (2022), this lack of social interaction during online learning could impact students' feelings of preparedness to practice in their future professional careers.

2.6. Importance of Empathy for University Students

Healthcare professionals, such as nurses, doctors, psychologists, and social workers, are required to empathise with their patients or clients, to understand what their patient or client requires of them, and thus respond accordingly (Moudatsou et al., 2020). According to Moudatsou et al. (2020), caring is a key aspect of empathy that is needed within healthcare professions, as caring or the desire to assist others, is a by-product of empathy. Therefore, developing a deep sense of empathy is an essential component of person-centred care, as it fosters a helping relationship between the healthcare practitioner and their clients or patients (Gholamzadeh et al., 2018). This improves the quality of the patient or client's treatment outcomes, as well as increasing patient/client satisfaction (Moudatsou et al., 2020). Archer and Turner (2019) state that empathy is most important when working as a healthcare professional in diverse contexts, such as South Africa, as the patient/client is less likely to trust a healthcare provider that they cannot necessarily identify with, based on cultural differences and racial disparities. To build trust and rapport with patients or clients, the healthcare practitioner should focus on developing empathetic skills, which will allow for a deepened understanding of the feelings of fear and anxiety that often arise during consultations and treatment processes. Therefore, empathy extends far beyond the workplace for psychological professionals, as research shows that psychology students require empathy to excel academically while studying and working on the job (Ratka, 2018). According to Ratka (2018), empathy assists students in developing effective skills, behaviours, and attitudes, which are essential for a career grounded in human interaction. Therefore, this research study aims to explore the extent to which

empathy development was possibly affected, within a particular sample, during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

2.6.1. Ways to Practically Develop Empathy in University Contexts

There are a variety of practical ways to develop a deeper sense of empathy; as Bell (2018) states the best way to promote the development of empathy in university settings is to provide creative activities, which include both affective and cognitive aspects. Empathetic growth occurs when university students engage in group work, social interaction, and collective learning, in understanding a variety of students' perspectives in the learning environment (Numanee et al., 2020). In a study conducted at the University of Cape Town, an emphasis on the relationship between health science students and the academic staff was identified as a key component of successful communication during online learning (Irlam & Zweigenthal, 2020). Ultimately, the literature around the importance of empathy development for university students pursuing a healthcare profession accentuates the need for support from peers and staff, as well as a high level of social interaction. It is against this background that the influence of the online learning environment implemented at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) during the COVID-19 pandemic, needs further exploration in terms of fostering optimal levels of empathy development for future health professionals.

2.7. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter outlined the available literature around empathy and empathy development, as well as explored the development of empathy, or lack thereof, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The key topics under investigation were; (1) the definition of empathy, (2) the development of empathy, (3) the factors contributing to empathy development, (4) empathy development during the COVID-19 Pandemic, (5) education and the COVID-19 Pandemic, and (6) the importance of empathy for university students. All these topics were

considered throughout this research study and informed the formulation of the interview questions during the data collection process. Aspects of the literature review can also be found in the discussion section of the study, as it aided the interpretation of the findings.



CHAPTER THREE

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology section describes the exploratory methods used to collect and analyse the data from the participants that met the inclusion criteria. The participants were strategically recruited, guided by the literature and the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), as the theoretical framework of the study.

3.1. Aim of the Study

This study aimed to explore postgraduate psychology students' perceptions and experiences of empathy in an online learning environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.

3.2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are;

- 1.) To explore postgraduate psychology students' perceptions of empathy, in a multicultural South African context prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 2.) To understand how postgraduate psychology students experienced empathy in an online learning environment where social interaction was minimal due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 3.) To establish how postgraduate psychology students, feel their development of empathetic growth has been impacted by online learning, post the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 4.) To explore postgraduate psychology students' perceived importance of developing empathy, post a global pandemic.

3.3. Research Setting

The Department of Psychology, at a historically disadvantaged Higher Education Institution (HEI) located in the Western Cape, was selected as the research setting. Unique to

this institution was the ethos of community and social engagement, intending to enhance social change (“Mission, Vision and History”, 2022). Therefore, selecting participants from this specific institution was intentional with the hope of gathering useful in-depth data that could contribute to developing a rich understanding in response to the research objectives that guided this study. The department at the HEI offers two master's in psychology structured programmes, namely; Research Psychology and Clinical Psychology, whereby both programmes are accredited by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and lead to professional registration. Typically, students at the HEI are encouraged to complete their studies within two years.

Focusing on 2022 student registration information, there were nine Masters in Research Psychology students in their M1 year, with ten students in their M2 year. For the same period, there were six Clinical Psychology students in their M1 year, with seven in their M2 year. Therefore, the total population of thirty-two students met the inclusion criteria. Thus, approximately two cohorts met the inclusion criteria for this study.

3.4. Research Design

An exploratory qualitative research design, best suited the nature of this study, as it explored new insights, ideas, and thoughts, which fostered a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, within a new field of research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). According to Stebbins (2001), exploratory studies form part of the bigger sphere of discovery, in that, it allows for phenomena to be defined and for concepts to be re-defined.

This study design is based on a phenomenological research methodology, in that, the data was collected to describe, rather than to explain postgraduate master's psychology students' experiences of online learning concerning their empathy development (Heidegger, 2005). This is because a qualitative paradigm includes the ontological assumption that there

are multiple realities, as reality is depicted as socially constructed and holistic (Moroi, 2021). Moroi (2021) extends this by acknowledging that the epistemological assumption in this study, would include the participants being the knower, and the researcher gathering data from their experiences. Therefore, the methodology or the approach the researcher took to collect data from the participants was through the method of interviewing.

3.5. Sampling Technique

This study used a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling refers to, “a technique in which every unit in the population has a chance (non-zero probability) of being selected in the sample, and this chance can be accurately determined” (Obilor, 2023, p. 2).

Each participant was required to meet the following inclusion criteria to participate in this study; (1) the participant must have registered at the HEI for the 2022 academic year, (2) the participant must be registered as a postgraduate psychology student at a masters level (structured research and clinical masters only), and (3) the participant must have experienced online learning between the years 2020 to 2022, as this was the peak period of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The rationale for the inclusion criteria was based on the accessibility of the participants, as the researcher could conveniently access postgraduate students throughout the study. Additionally, another important element in this study, is that this particular sample of postgraduate psychology students were being trained towards becoming HPCSA-accredited healthcare professionals, in the field of psychology, where empathy is an essential social skill. Furthermore, the rationale for using this sample was also based on the fact that the structured master’s cohorts at the selected HEI were reflective of the multicultural context in South Africa.

For this study, the total sample size was ten participants, whereby this study met the proposed qualitative sample size guidelines of interviewing between eight to twelve participants (Vasileiou et al., 2018). After the researcher reached the tenth interview, data saturation was reached. Data saturation, which is often referred to as the ‘gold standard’ for

qualitative research, can be defined as the point where no new information is found within the data collection process (Saunders et al., 2018). Most masters research structured postgraduate students reported experiencing online or hybrid learning for about two years and 6 months, whereas the clinical participants reported only experiencing online or hybrid learning for about one year or less, due to the time lapse between their honours year and getting into the clinical programme. Therefore, the career trajectory is slightly different for both cohorts.

3.6. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, as this method allowed the researcher to prompt or probe the interviewee for more information and clarity, instead of using a more structured interview approach (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The interview questions (Appendix E) were designed by the researcher and supervisor, and because English is the medium of instruction at the HEI, all interviews were conducted in English. The interview questions were formulated using the constructs and available desktop literature, which were developed in response to the objectives that guided the research process. The following section highlights the various steps involved in the data collection process.

3.6.1. Step 1

After obtaining ethics clearance (Appendix C) the first step in the data collection process was to recruit the participants. Therefore, the researcher approached the Registrar's Office at the HEI and requested access and permission to interview the stipulated potential participants. The permissions letter from the HEI is stipulated in Appendix D. Once the Registrar approved the study, an invitation outlining the study was sent to the potential participants via the HEI communication platforms. From there, those who were interested in participating in this research study were able to contact the researcher directly.

3.6.2. Step 2

Before the interviews took place, the information sheet (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B) were emailed to the participants. Once the signed consent form was received by the researcher, a date was set for the respective interviews. All documents were saved in a password-protected drive. In the consent form, the participant was asked to provide informed consent to being recorded during the interview, to which all participants agreed before the interview proceeded. The interviews were arranged according to the preference of the participant. Overall, one participant was interviewed face-to-face on the HEI's campus, whilst the remaining nine participants preferred to engage in the interview via the Zoom Video Communications platform. While each interview was estimated to be roughly thirty to forty-five minutes, each interview was between fifty to sixty minutes long, as the participants displayed a keen interest in the research area and therefore provided in-depth information. After each interview, the researcher asked each participant concluding questions to ensure the participant did not require additional counselling services. The researcher took notes throughout the interviews, which assisted in facilitating the analysis process, as the researcher could refer back to important details that occurred during the interviews (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.6.3. Step 3

The recordings were stored in a password-protected drive, that could only be accessed by the researcher and supervisor. The notes taken during the interview were scanned in and saved in the same password-protected drive, and the original notes were shredded. After each interview, the researcher engaged in a reflective exercise. The reflection exercise was guided by a set of questions i.e., how was the interview experience? what stood out for me? What could I possibly do differently? What were the key aspects that emerged from the interview? The researcher was reflective throughout the data collection process, as researcher bias could jeopardise the trustworthiness of the findings (Smith & Noble, 2014).

3.7. Data Analysis

Data analysis helps to reduce large amounts of data into manageable pieces that answer the research question, aims, and objectives (Kawulich, 2004). In the qualitative data analysis process, it can be useful for the researcher to immerse oneself in the process and become familiar with the response styles before diving into the analysis process (Kawulich, 2004). Therefore, to analyse the data collected in this study a reflexive thematic analysis was used. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) can be defined as, “an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given data set” (Byrne, 2022, p. 1392). To enhance the data analysis process, the use of ATLAS.ti software, which is an electronic data management tool was employed to assist with the qualitative data analysis (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

According to Braun and Clarke (2019), there are six steps which must be adhered to within the data analysis process. Braun and Clarke (2019) view the steps as a guideline and not a specific set of rules that must be followed. Therefore, RTA differs from general thematic analysis, as the role of the researcher is essential in the full evaluation of the data being collected (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Table 1

Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Example of procedure for each step
1. Familiarising oneself with the data	Transcribing data; reading and re-reading; noting down initial codes

2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the data set, collating data relevant to each code
3. Searching for the themes	Collating codes into potential themes; gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4. Involved in reviewing the themes	Checking if the themes work concerning the coded extracts and the entire data set
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, generation of clearing names for each theme
6. Producing the report	Final opportunity for analysis selecting appropriate extracts; discussion of the analysis; relates to the research questions and literature

Note. This table was created based on the reading from “*Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis*” by Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2019, *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 11(4).

3.7.1. Phase 1

The first step in RTA is to familiarise oneself with the data, whereby the ten interviews were transcribed by the researcher and examined against the audio recordings. Once the interviews were fully transcribed, the documents were uploaded into the ATLAS.ti software.

From there the transcripts were read and reviewed repeatedly before generating the initial codes. The field notes and reflections that were developed after each interview also provided a depth of understanding, as well as the researcher's subjective account of the interview. At this point, the researcher also reflected on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This is because the researcher was aware of adhering to the process of self-reflection to understand how personal biases may have influenced the research process (Campbell et al., 2021). Given that the researcher was a current student in one of the structured programmes, it was important to acknowledge this and explore whether any personal biases were unintendedly introduced into the research process.

3.7.2. Phase 2

The researcher analysed all the data, whereby they generated four hundred and fifty initial codes, in total. According to Campbell et al. (2021), it is important to refer back to the main research question, aims, and objectives of the study when formulating the initial codes. Coding occurred over roughly a month, with one transcript taking approximately one day to code fully. It is very common for a novice researcher to generate more descriptive codes than a more experienced researcher, as a novice researcher often creates more descriptive codes to get a 'feel' of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

3.7.3. Phase 3

In this phase, the data analysis process started to take shape as the researcher shifted from identifying codes to formulating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The formulation of a theme, which is defined as something which represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 82), is based on the decisions of the researcher, in shaping the data. The codes were reviewed and grouped based on how they naturally clustered. At this point, it was important to establish relationships between the themes, and sub-themes, so that an overall 'picture' of the data, that the data was attempting to

tell, could emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher established a total of four themes from the codes, within the data.

3.7.4. Phase 4

Based on the theme generation in the previous phase, the themes were then reviewed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During this process, some codes were moved into other code groups and some code groups were merged. No themes or subthemes were removed, as the researcher and supervisor felt that each theme and sub-theme had emerged succinctly from the data.

3.7.5. Phase 5

According to Braun and Clarke (2019), naming and defining the themes involves the deep analytic work portrayed within the process of RTA, by crucially shaping up the analysis into its fine-grained detail. Researchers often find phases five and six indistinguishable from each other, as these two processes often overlap (Braun & Clarke, 2012). At this point, the researcher found it useful to go back to the literature, research question, aims, and objectives, when naming the themes.

Table 2

Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Defining Empathy in a Multicultural Context	Factors Contributing to Empathy Development
2. The Shift from Face-to-Face to Online Learning	

3. The Impact of Online Learning on Empathy Development during the COVID-19 Pandemic	Factors Inhibiting Empathy Development during Online Learning Social Disconnection and Isolation
4. The Importance of Empathy for Future Healthcare Professionals	COVID-19 Pandemic as a Learning Environment for Student Preparedness to Practice as a Healthcare Practitioner

Note. This table is a diagrammatic representation of the themes and sub-themes identified through the analysis process. *Own Work.*

3.7.6. Phase 6

In the findings and discussion sections of this study, the phase of producing the report was presented. This report write-up is based on the process of using the ATLAS.ti software, the transcripts, and the reflections to formulate a description of what emerged from the data. Additionally, each theme and sub-theme identified was described through the social community psychology lens of the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) to capture the essence of the experiences within the sample population, regarding empathy development during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

3.8. Trustworthiness

The term trustworthiness or rigour, which is identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is an essential part of this study, as trustworthiness ensures the validity of qualitative research that is determined by several factors, including credibility, transferability, confirmability, and

dependability. The factors of rigour were integrated into the conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis and ethical processes throughout this research and will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

3.8.1. Credibility

Credibility refers to the congruency, plausibility, and truthfulness of research (Cutcliffe et al., 1999). There is a plethora of ways to ensure credibility in qualitative research, such as through triangulation, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). In this study, the researcher engaged in a rigorous process of exploring the available desktop literature and the previous methods used to collect similar information. Additionally, to ensure maximum levels of honesty from the participants, the researcher stipulated that the participants could participate voluntarily and that rapport would be the main focus from the beginning of contact with each participant.

Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without justification for doing so, as stipulated in the information sheet (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B). The interviews were transcribed immediately after each interview had taken place, for the researcher to reflect and document each interview experience. Lastly, the researcher was in constant contact with their supervisor to ask questions and be guided on certain aspects of the qualitative process, especially regarding using the ATLAS.ti software.

3.8.2. Dependability

According to Bitsch (2005), dependability refers to the stability of the findings over time. This entailed the participants being debriefed at the end of the interview session as they were provided with an opportunity to clarify interpretations and ask the researcher any questions they had. Furthermore, dependability was ensured, as the researcher was able to reflect upon each interview, after the interview sessions.

3.8.3. Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that “as far as possible the research findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). Therefore, in this study, the researcher remained in a reflective praxis and documented all decisions made throughout the research process (audit trail). This included partaking in a reflective exercise after each interview, to ensure the researcher’s thoughts, biases or micro-prejudices, that might have occurred during the interview, did not influence the overall findings.

3.8.4 Transferability

Lastly, transferability in qualitative research can be defined in terms of “the results being understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the organisation or organisations and, perhaps, the geographical area in which the fieldwork was carried out” (Shenton, 2004, p. 70). In this study, the main context being unpacked is online learning within the student’s household, thus, the literature, which serves as a baseline of information, assisted in framing the content of the study before unpacking the findings, in the discussion section.

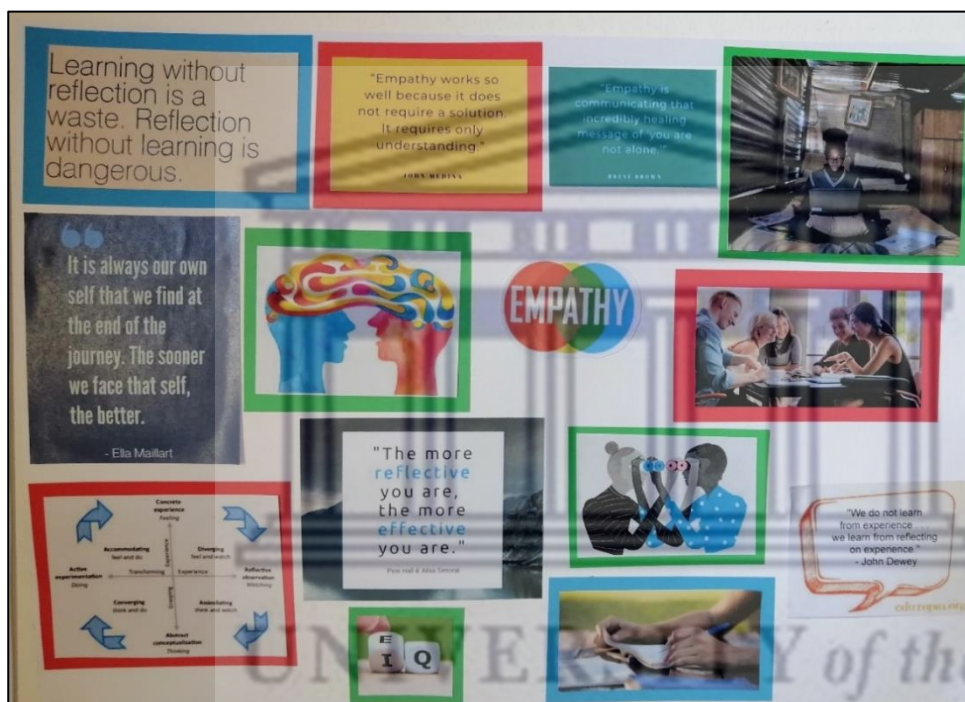
3.9. Reflexivity

Reflexivity was a vital component in the formulation of this study, as the philosophy of this qualitative study and the worldview of the researcher needed to align, to depict the in-depth nature of this particular type of research (Davis, 2020). As a researcher, there were – and are – certain personal aspects about myself that had the potential to influence the quality of the data that emerged, if left unchecked during the phase of the execution of my fieldwork. Therefore, in this section, I will highlight a few salient factors that relate to my positionality as the researcher conducting this particular research, to avoid influencing the quality of the data emerging from the context.

Throughout the process of working with the data gathered, I could relate to some of the experiences that were shared by participants. I had a genuine interest in the research topic and thus conceptualised this research by adhering to the guidance of supervision. The supervision sessions were insightful and provided a positive space for self-reflection and de-brief. This led to the depiction of my thoughts, biases, and micro-prejudices in the form of a reflective mind map, within the writing space, shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Poster of the Researcher's Position on Empathy



Note. This poster served as a visual reminder for the researcher to remain in a reflective praxis during the writing process. *Photo of Reflective Mind map. Own Work.*

This poster increased my awareness of my perceptions and experiences of empathy, before the interview process. For example, I included an image of a young student studying online, in what seemed to be an informal settlement in South Africa (Renganathan, 2009; Eshuis et al., 2022). From my perspective, this image was important to include, as it could be representative of many students' experiences in South Africa during the hard lockdown, where

their home environment made it challenging to continue with their studies. This assisted me in focusing on producing research in this field of psychology, as it could be highly beneficial for students who found themselves in similar online learning situations, as depicted in the image (Eshuis et al., 2022).

Based on the notes from my reflective journal, it was evident that some participants were more open to sharing their experiences, whilst others were more hesitant. Overall, all participants felt the interview sessions were highly insightful and well-facilitated.

3.10. Ethical Considerations

In terms of ethical considerations; strict confidentiality protocols were instilled from the beginning of the study, whereby the researcher protected the information and details of each participant.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC), with the reference number HS22/4/9 (Appendix C), and the letter of permission to conduct research at the HEI (Appendix D). Once all ethical guidelines were adhered to the data collection for this study proceeded.

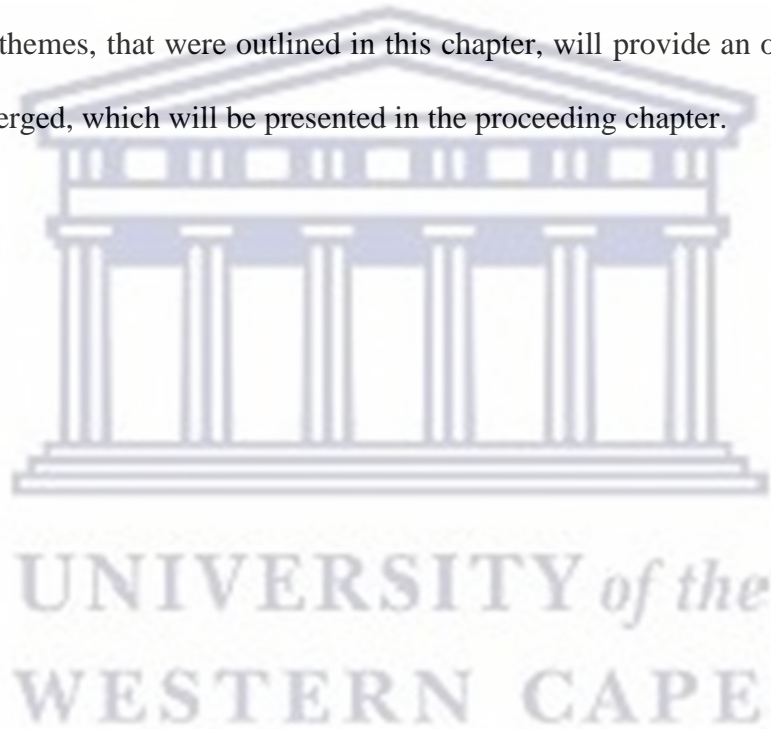
In terms of anonymity, the researcher also assigned each participant a unique participant identifier to protect their identity. Each participant's details are kept in a password-protected drive and only the participant identifiers were used in the study. Additionally, the researcher ensured that all the information collected was protected as outlined in the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act) (De Stadler & Esselaar, 2015).

This study being a medium-risk study included the possibility that during the interview process, participants could have experienced or encountered triggering questions that could have fostered acute emotional reactions. For this reason, a contingency plan was put in place where the researcher could refer the participant to relevant counselling services. The identified services included the Centre for Student Support Service at the HEI. Alternatively, participants

were encouraged to make use of mental health agencies, such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group [SADAG] that have a 24-hour helpline (0800 456 789). Additionally, free counselling services could also have been provided by Lifeline South Africa (0861 322 322) for the participants if they experienced distress. All these helplines and services were stipulated in the information sheet (Appendix A).

3.11. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter provided an outline of the methodology the researcher employed for this exploratory qualitative research study. This section focused on the importance of reflection, as well as the ethical considerations the researcher put into place before collecting data. The themes and sub-themes, that were outlined in this chapter, will provide an outline of the key findings that emerged, which will be presented in the proceeding chapter.



CHAPTER 4

4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis stage of the research process. In this section, brief demographic details of the participants will be provided. The themes were generated using an iterative process of reflective thematic analysis (RTA), as posited by Braun and Clarke (2019). The research objectives guided the identification of themes and it was clear that there was synergy across the research objectives, as the perceptions and experiences of empathy expressed by the participants, were connected across the research objectives. These will become clearer in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

4.1. Biographical Details of the Participants

Table 3 provided a detailed account of each participant, whilst protecting their identity through the use of participant identifiers. All participants provided informed consent and were fully aware that their participation in the study was voluntary.

Table 3

Participant Details

Participant Identifier	Age	Ethnicity	Area of Residence	Master's Programme	Time Studying Online
P1	26	Coloured	Kuils River	M Research Structured	Two years and six months
P2	24	Black	Gugulethu	M Research Structured	Two years and six months
P3	28	Black	Durbanville	M Research Structured	Two years and six months

P4	24	Coloured	Mitchells Plain	M Research Structured	Two years and six months
P5	25	White	Century City	M Clinical Structured	One year
P6	26	Black	Stellenbosch	M Research Structured	Two years and six months
P7	24	Coloured	Mitchells Plain	M Research Structured	Two years and six months
P8	26	Black	Parow	M Research Structured	8 months
P9	23	Black	Samora Machel	M Research Structured	Two years and six months
P10	28	Coloured	Somerset West	M Clinical Structured	One year and six months

Note. This table showcases the participant's details, *Own Work*.

The researcher noted that there were significant disparities in the depth of the participant's responses to the interview questions regarding their perceptions and experiences of online learning. This was due to the variation of time each participant had experienced online learning. For example, the participants who experienced online learning for two years and six months had more in-depth responses to the interview questions and could reflect on more examples of their lived experiences. Whereas, the participants who had spent less than a year

in an online learning context did not have the same depth of awareness regarding their experiences.

Additionally, this study gathered data from participants in a variety of locations in the Western Cape of South Africa. For example, some participants were located in middle-class income areas, whereas others were located in low-income communities. This impacted their responses to the interview questions, as each community or household would have access to slightly different contextual resources and support structures, during the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

4.2. Key Themes

Several themes were identified whereby the following table provides a representation of these themes concerning the research objectives.

Table 4

Objectives, Themes and Sub-themes

Objective	Themes	Sub-themes
To explore postgraduate psychology students' perceptions of empathy, in a multicultural South African context prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic.	1. Defining Empathy in a Multicultural Context	Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

<p>To understand how postgraduate psychology students experienced empathy in an online learning environment where social interaction was minimal due to the COVID-19 Pandemic</p>	<p>2. The Shift from Face-to-Face to Online Learning</p>	
<p>To establish how postgraduate psychology students, feel their development of empathetic growth has been impacted by online learning, post the COVID-19 Pandemic.</p>	<p>3. The Impact of Online Learning on Empathy Development during the COVID-19 Pandemic</p>	<p>Factors Inhibiting Empathy Development during Online Learning Social Disconnection and Isolation</p>
<p>To explore postgraduate psychology students' perceived importance of developing empathy, post a global pandemic</p>	<p>4. The Importance of Empathy for Future Healthcare Professionals</p>	<p>COVID-19 Pandemic as a Learning Environment for Student Preparedness to Practice as a Healthcare Practitioner</p>

Note. This table represents the objectives, themes and sub-themes within this study, *Own Work.*

The key themes, and sub-themes, mentioned within this section were identified using the qualitative data management tool, ATLAS.ti software. A total of four themes and four sub-themes emerged from the data, which is further described in the proceeding section.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Defining Empathy in a Multicultural Context

The initial questions in the interview were about how the participants perceived the term – empathy. The responses varied, however, there was a consensus that empathy is based on a deepened understanding of individuals' social contexts. Participants used terminology such as; compassion, kindness, and support interchangeably, as they believed it related to the construct of empathy. This is evident in the following quotations:

“I think it just stems around having an understanding of an individual of their situation or the particular circumstance, and you being able to display that kindness, that consideration, and understanding towards them” (P1, 26, M Research, two years and six months online).

“Empathy is very much attached to compassion, which is that level of understanding and level of need” (P8, 26, M Research, 8 months online).

“Empathy for me is sort of cultivating an understanding of someone else's experience [...] So somewhat placing yourself in that person's shoes” (P10, 28, M Clinical, one year and six months online).

Some participants also noted that they did not know of or use the actual term empathy in their childhoods, but rather believed that empathy is about being there for other people through actions. Empathy is more so described in terms of physical acts of service towards others, based on what the participants had witnessed or experienced during their childhoods or within their community contexts.

“When I was younger you don't really use the word empathy as a thing, you know, it's not really recognised when you are younger, because obviously, when you are in your

childhood years, and it's a big word [...] it is more about just being there” (P7, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

“Being a giving person, so it’s not just about the term empathy but actually how you act you know, it’s very rare to even say empathy” (P2, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

The participants often struggled to answer the initial questions regarding conceptualising empathy, as a few participants noted that this was the first time they were ever asked to define this construct and would prefer to give examples rather than conceptualise empathy as a term.

4.2.1.1. Theme 1, Sub-theme 1: Factors Contributing to Empathy Development. A sub-theme under the main theme that surfaced from the data, was that participants understood empathy to be some kind of skill that could be learned. Participants spoke of many factors, they felt had contributed to their empathy development, and overall perspective when defining empathy. The re-occurring factors identified by the researcher were upbringing and family life, past experiences, culture, community and religion (specifically Christianity), as reflected in the following quotations.

“I am an African woman, so, we need to exercise empathy in our culture. [...] So, in terms of culture, it's very important for us to be empathetic towards one another, we contribute, we sort of you just do this thing where you practice Ubuntu in a way, it's umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (zulu), it's you help me I help you, you know, that's how our culture is” (P6, 26, M Research, two years and six months online).

“I would say background and parenting. I would also say adversity and going through, I think going through a lot can change the way you feel about other people” (P5, 25 M Clinical, one year online).

“I'm a Christian [...] I think my beliefs [...]it sorts of grounds you; it grounds me in myself, and how I see the world and how I see others. And so, our first point, according to the Bible, is to love others.” (P10, 28, M Clinical, one year and six months online).

Based on the participants' responses it is clear that these factors, which they felt contributed towards their development of empathy, were deeply rooted in how they expressed and identified themselves within their various contexts. Interestingly, these factors mentioned were all based on elements of socialisation, often from their childhoods. These factors are spoken of in words such as ‘grounds you’, ‘how I see the world’, ‘helping others’, ‘practising empathy’ and ‘exercising empathy’, which provides an understanding of their lived experiences of empathy through actions and serving others.

Appendix F showcases an extract from the full code report, which depicts the responses of all the participants with regard to what they felt were factors or influences, which contributed to their development. The researcher decided to include the codes that relate to this theme in Appendix F, as the responses within this particular section represent the importance of exploring empathy in a multicultural context, as each participant uniquely described their lived experiences by using context-specific examples.

4.2.2. Theme 2: Shift from Face-to-Face to Online Learning

There was a consensus among the participants that the shift from being in a face-to-face learning environment to an online learning environment was a challenging transition. This was evident in the participant’s responses, as a lack of social interaction and support was depicted

as a barrier to experiencing empathy in an online learning environment. Interacting in an online space, where the participants could not interpret the body language of peers and lecturers, was regarded as a major challenge. The participants believed that the lack of social cues in an online learning environment led to a sense of mistrust and difficulty in building relationships with others. This is reflected in the following quotations;

“It was very easy when it was face to face, I think because you could see the person and when you had a problem with someone or a lecturer and maybe you had a problem with the module, you could go see them. And then they had this relationship, it was very supportive, I think because you could see their reactions at that point. You don't normally feel that online because it's that sort of barrier. It's like you are hidden by the screen, you can't see the full body of a person” (P6, 26, M Research, two years and six months online).

“So, on campus, there was more understanding. It was nice to actually be empathetic towards others because you got it in return, you know [...] I would say that empathy towards the lecturers and vice versa wasn't really there. [...] you cannot judge based on their body language or anything like that” (P7, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

“I am also just more aware when we are in the same space versus online, where we are all hidden from each other, because of our cameras being off and that. And as a result, even though empathy was something reinforced from childhood for me, when you come around empathetic people it really helps you to be more empathetic” (P8, 26 M Research, 8 months online).

The shift from face-to-face to online learning was challenging, as the participants seemed more aware of themselves in the face-to-face learning space, in comparison to learning online. The participants reflected on how much they had previously relied on body language or facial expressions to interpret the behaviour of others. Hence, within the online learning space, participants discussed this idea of being ‘hidden’ from others, as their only form of social interaction and communication was conducted via online platforms where social cues were limited.

4.2.3. Theme 3: Impact of Online Learning on Empathy Development during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This theme encompasses the technical and practical challenges the participants experienced while studying in an online learning environment. This includes various factors contributing to or inhibiting empathy development during online learning and also includes the aspects of social disconnection and isolation, as accentuated by the sub-themes. Many participants expressed that, due to technical difficulties, it was challenging to complete group work and to detach from studying after hours.

Therefore, the fact that the participants struggled to adjust to learning online, brought the element of adaptability to light. Here, adaptability serves as a component of empathy, as it is evident that not only do healthcare professionals require the skill of empathy, but also various other social skills to function optimally.

“So also, like some people [...] they don’t work hard, and who submit crappy work, and don’t attend meetings, who don’t respond to groups, you know, them who just don’t do their part, make it difficult to experience empathy, you know, in an online learning platform” (P2, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

“Probably load-shedding to be honest, like that was not easy” (P7, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

“Because of the online thing, because you're at home all the time, your working hours suddenly become the whole day [...] So I found it very difficult when other people weren't very understanding and they didn't understand why I would say no to things” (P1, 26, M Research, two years and six months online).

The participants explored this theme, in more depth during the interviews, thus, two subthemes were created under the main theme, i.e., (1) factors inhibiting empathy development during online learning and (2) social disconnection and isolation.

4.2.3.1. Theme 3, Sub-theme 1: Factors Inhibiting Empathy Development during Online Learning. The participants provided their experiences and perceptions around how they felt empathy was developed or facilitated in an online learning environment, whereby they were prompted to comment on three sub-questions; based on the content in the modules, their lecturer and supervision experience, and their experiences of group work and peer support.

It is evident from the extracted quotations that the content did not foster empathy, but rather the opportunities for personal contact with others were highlighted by the participants as beneficial. Therefore, the individuals responsible for bringing across the course content, which included staff and peer support, were outlined as the main source of empathy development in an online learning environment. This is evident in the quotes provided below.

“In terms of the actual content of the course, I didn't feel like it changed very much from when it was face-to-face [...] I had a lovely supervisor, my clinical supervisor, so, she went out of her way to make it, you know, as constructive as possible” (P10, 28, M Clinical, one year and six months online).

“It's up to the lecturers themselves to ensure that they practice empathy towards their students. Like, for instance, last year I had debriefing sessions on Fridays. Just to talk about everything” (P6, 26, M Research, two years and six months online).

“They couldn't really adapt the course content too much because the course had to remain HPCSA accredited [...] I think I gained a lot of empathy from my peers. You know, I didn't maybe realise the impacts of how difficult it was where they were living in their circumstances” (P5, 25, M Clinical, one year online).

4.2.3.2. Theme 3, Sub-theme 2: Social Disconnection and Isolation. The majority of participants felt a sense of social disconnection, which resulted in social isolation, not only within the process of studying at home but also from friends and family support structures.

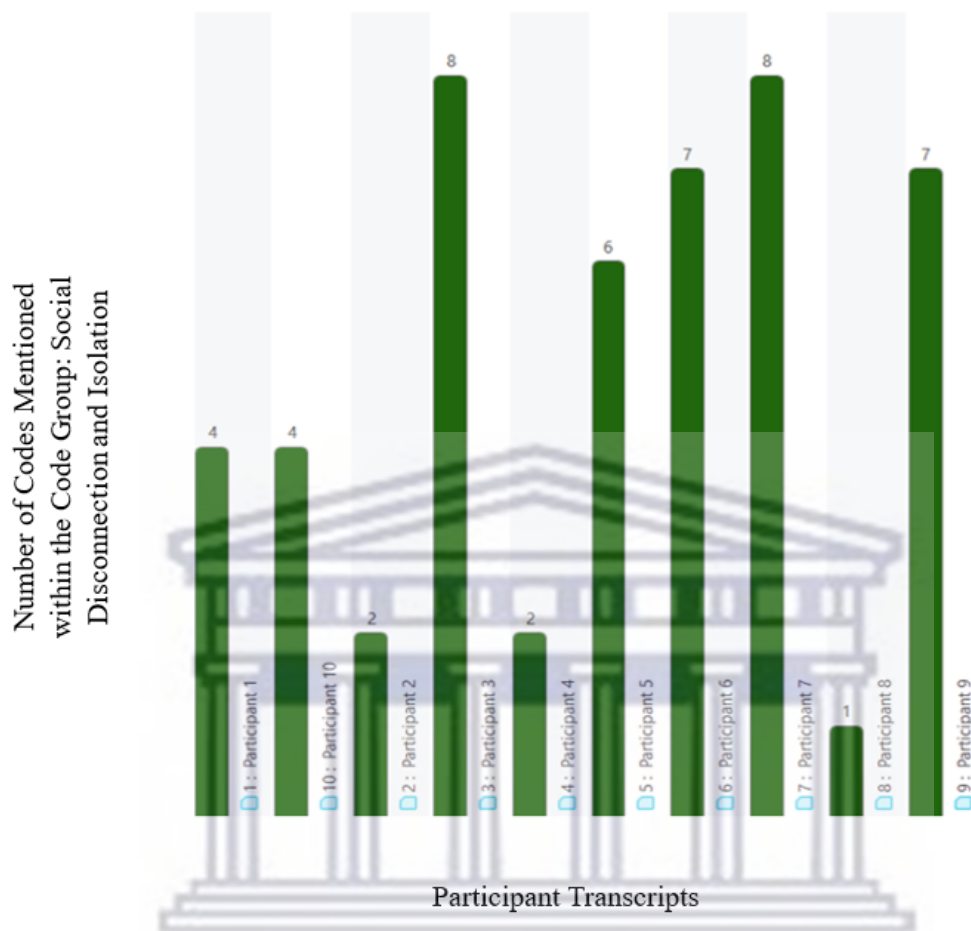
“I would feel like I was stuck in these four walls the entire day, but certain people would not respect that you were learning from home now so there was that factor” (P4, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

“You know, it actually makes you feel lonely like you literally, on your own [...] So there's a lack of communication between you and your peers that they literally like they're on their own” (P7, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

These feelings of loneliness and social isolation described by the participants, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, are represented in Figure 3 below. This figure was formulated using the new feature of code-document analysis on the ATLAS.ti 23 version.

Figure 3

Bar Graph of the Code-Document Analysis



Note. The bar graph generated from the ATLAS.ti 23 software showcases the number of times each participant used negative terminology or mentioned their feelings of isolation and loneliness, as discussed within the theme. The frequency of these terms is depicted by the number above each bar in the figure. Therefore, the higher the bar the more negative they felt about their experiences of online learning. *Own Work.*

As seen in this figure, all the participants used depressive and isolating language at some point during the interview. What is noteworthy when discussing this figure, is that the

participants who had endured online learning for a longer period, for example; participants three, six, seven and nine, used language that was more negative than the participants who experienced online learning for less than one year. This shows that the length of time that the participant experienced online learning had an impact on their overall response to the questions in this study.

Interestingly, even though the participants felt socially isolated and disconnected during online learning, the majority of the participants preferred to be interviewed online, rather than meeting in person. This meant that social cues and body language were often hidden during the interviews, however, the participants opted for this type of engagement. The participant who asked to be interviewed in person seemed to engage better in conversation and seemed to be less concerned about connectivity issues or being misunderstood during the interview, as the researcher could pick up on social cues through the participant's body language.

4.2.4. Theme 4: Importance of Empathy for Future Healthcare Professionals

The participants noted that experiencing empathy is essential within their profession, as future research psychologists or clinical psychologists, because empathy helps to better engage with participants or clients, and assists in community and one-on-one engagement and interactions.

“I think empathy is very important in my professional career, because research, I am pursuing research psychology, so there are instances where I have to interact with where I have to do community engagement. So, in that sense, I even have to empathize with people to be able to understand them” (P3, 28, M Research, two years and six months online).

“I think it's everything. Yeah. I think that's a perfect way to describe it. I think it's everything. I think that my ability to empathise is a huge part of who I am. But it will be a huge part of my profession, and of how I connect with people and with clients” (P5, 25, M Clinical, one-year online).

4.2.4.1. Theme 4, Sub-theme 1: COVID-19 Pandemic as a Learning Environment for Student Preparedness to Practice as a Healthcare Practitioner. There were mixed responses in terms of the participants feeling prepared to practice as healthcare professionals in the future, as some participants felt that they had an increased sense of empathy but yet still felt disconnected from socialising and building relationships with individuals within their specialised field of psychology. There was also a sense of extended fear and anxiety, in terms of their future as healthcare practitioners.

“It's based on a dual role for me like I feel two ways about it, yes, I have more empathy for certain people but some people do not deserve empathy because of how they engaged online or how they engaged in their personal life but I feel like I am very much prepared because a lot of growth happened for me this last year. And all those experiences have contributed to our response to situations” (P4, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

“Because I feel it on both sides. I think, on the one hand, it made me more attuned to others [...] I think the adversity and the challenging side of this pandemic have made me feel more prepared and made me more flexible. Like my adaptability and things like that, but yet there is still this underlying fear [...] And, you know, there might be future times where a lot of clients prefer online just because that's what they like, or they enjoy. And that could be a possibility as well. So, it prepared me for the most part” (P5, 25, M Clinical, one year online).

“It would have to be a yes-no answer. Because, of course, it's helped me get acquainted with new ways of learning, new ways of being, new ways of communicating [...] But as a practising psychologist as well, I think it sort of just changed our way of thinking and instilled some fear” (P6, 26, M Research, two years and six months online).

Even though the participants had mixed responses when confronted with their feelings and beliefs regarding their preparedness as healthcare professionals, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. Their responses showcased the need for practical and social interaction within the communities and individuals they serve. This was a pivotal moment during the interview process where the participants became more aware of their roles and thought more deeply about what they had overcome during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

4.3. Chapter Summary

The researcher found that the themes identified provided an in-depth description of the experiences of the participants. The quotes were carefully selected within each theme to capture the essence of what the participants were saying, whilst ensuring the integrity of the study. The main findings were;

- The importance of defining empathy in a multicultural context
- That defining and developing empathy is informed by factors involving personal contact and social interaction
- There are challenges associated with shifting from face-to-face to online learning environments
- That empathy is important for future healthcare practitioners

CHAPTER 5

5. DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, the research findings were presented thematically, which led to the formulation of this current chapter; the discussion of the research findings. Therefore, this chapter showcases and discusses the linkages between the emerging themes as they relate to the research objectives stipulated as follows;

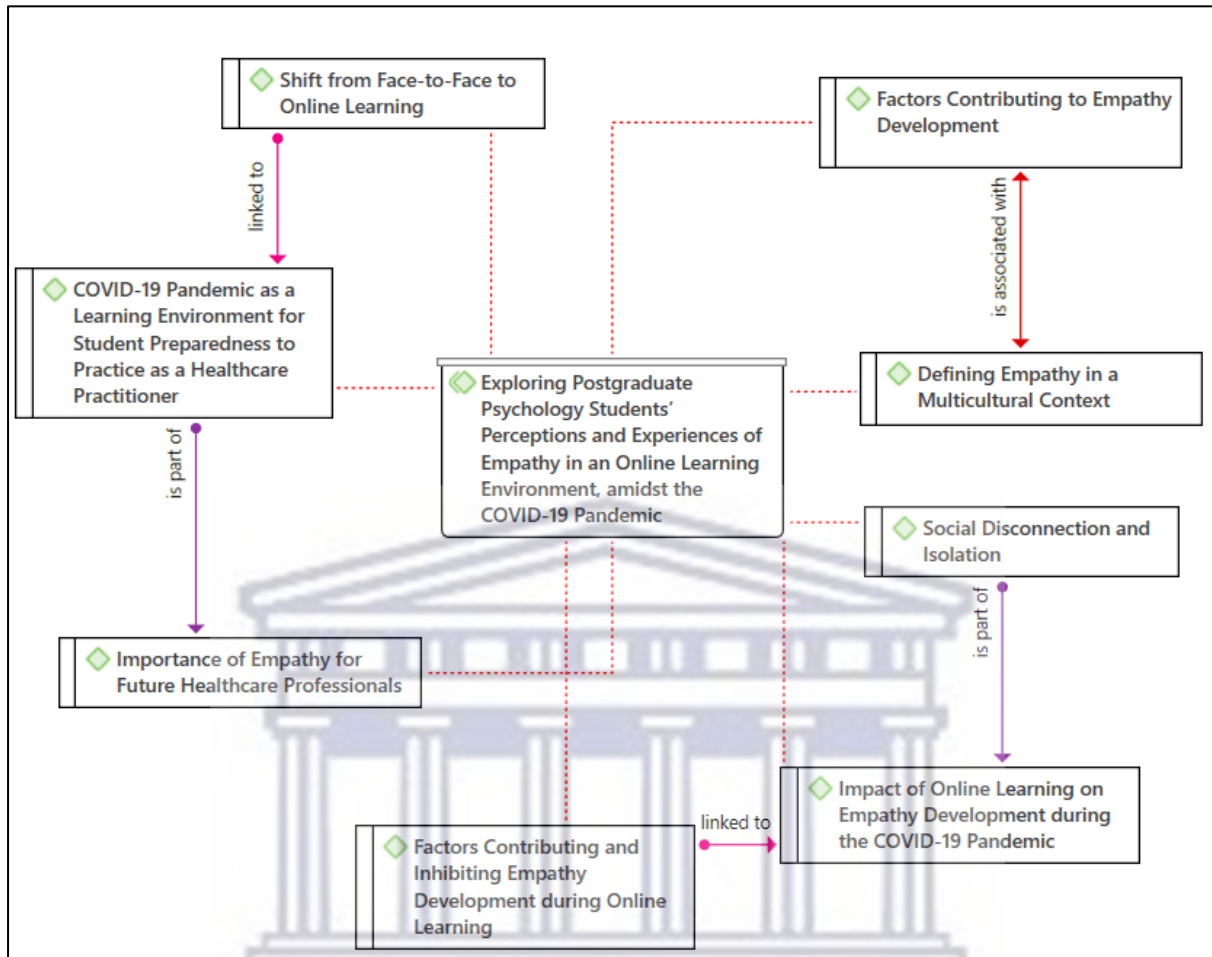
- 1.) To explore postgraduate psychology students' perceptions of empathy, in a multicultural South African context prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 2.) To understand how postgraduate psychology students experienced empathy in an online learning environment where social interaction was minimal due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 3.) To establish how postgraduate psychology students feel their development of empathetic growth has been impacted by online learning, post the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 4.) To explore postgraduate psychology students' perceived importance of developing empathy, post a global pandemic.

Before discussing the findings, the ATLAS.ti software was used to generate a visual representation of the interconnections between the themes and sub-themes, which clearly articulated how the themes align with the purpose of the research in relation to the research aim and objectives that guided the research process. Therefore, during this section, this diagrammatic representation added value to the discussion presented below.

Figure 4, thus, depicts how all the themes and sub-themes came together to showcase the essence of the findings.

Figure 4

Summary of the Themes and Sub-Themes



Note. Combined network generated from the ATLAS.ti 23 software. *Own Work.*

5.1. The Importance of Defining Empathy in a Multicultural Context

As discussed in the literature review chapter, there is no clear definition of empathy, as academics and researchers have not reached a consensus regarding this construct (Dong et al., 2017). However, the participants noted that empathy is a part of being human, and is fundamental to social connectedness.

Figure 4 suggests that there is an association between the process of defining empathy and its development in a multicultural context. This is evident as, even though the participants

provided slightly different phrasing of the construct of empathy, there was a consensus that empathy entails a deepened sense of understanding others, where the metaphor of ‘placing oneself in someone else’s shoes’ was commonly used. The participants were aware that empathy is context-specific, as many participants described empathy as being centred around particular experiences or needs that others may have within their various contexts.

This links to the idea that empathy is a learned skill, as each individual acquires empathy through the context in which empathy is being exchanged or facilitated. Furthermore, participants acknowledged that the term ‘empathy’ was not commonly used in everyday language, but rather that empathy is shown through physical and social actions. For example, words such as; kindness, love, compassion or care for others, were identified as being used more frequently during their childhood. According to Rapanta et al. (2021), empathy development occurs rapidly during childhood, based on actions of empathy rather than through language-based communications. Therefore, how the participants conceptualised empathy, is influenced by their experiences of empathy and contextual/social factors, within their unique contexts.

5.2. Defining and Developing Empathy is Informed by Factors Involving Personal Contact and Social Interaction

Another major finding is that the participants’ definitions of empathy seemed to be informed by their experiences of personal contact and social interactions. This is evident in the factors the participants identified, as having the greatest impact on their empathy development, which were; (1) upbringing and family life, (2) past experiences, (3) culture, (4) community, and (5) religion.

The factors identified by the participants differed from the factors identified within Western-based societies, whereby empathy is discussed as mainly consisting of Western-based

factors, such as; personality traits and genetics (Melchers et al., 2016; Knafo & Uzefovsky, 2013). Despite what is depicted in the literature, the participants in this study did not regard these Western-based factors as significantly influential in the development of empathy. The participants rather suggested that there should be a greater focus on how individuals are socialised within their context, as contextual elements related to their social environments, such as; community and culture, were discussed as highly influential, during the interviews. Therefore, these factors are deeply connected to how the participants were socialised and ultimately how the participants saw themselves in the world and experienced their realities. This is seen in the quote, *“It grounds me in myself, and how I see the world and how I see others”* (P10, 28, M Clinical, one year and six months online).

By exploring deeper into each of the various factors mentioned by the participants; culture and ethnicity seem to be interlinked, as participants who identified as ‘Black African’ discussed their experiences concerning the concept of Ubuntu. In traditional South African society, specifically amongst Black Africans, Ubuntu is seen as, “the act of being human, caring, sympathy, empathy, forgiveness, or any values of humanness towards others. Ubuntu is a quality in South African culture that encompasses the essence of compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity, in the interests of the building and maintaining a community with justice and mutual caring” (Lefa, 2015, p. 4). This alludes to the notion that empathy, in a multicultural context, is a fundamental cultural practice that cannot be condensed into a single definition or action but should be embraced as a central tendency of humanness which interconnects individuals within a multicultural society.

Participants who identified their ethnicity as ‘Black’ or ‘Coloured’ collectively mentioned that their religious beliefs in Christianity greatly influenced how they engaged with others, as they believed that they should follow biblical teachings, for example, to love and

care for others. Therefore, from a religious perspective, empathy is a cultural expression of social norms and values that enhance a sense of belonging in society (Essien, 2019). This is contradictory to the literature which states that the internal components, such as genetics or parenting, are the most significant factors in optimal human development (Heyes, 2018). However, from the findings in this study, it is clear that external factors (such as culture, context, and religion) need to be granted higher consideration in human social development, than what is depicted in the Western-based literature.

Furthermore, the factors of background and parenting, in a highly diverse multicultural context such as South Africa, have been found to have a major impact on the development of prosocial behaviour amongst children (Roman & Benjamin, 2022). Additionally, marginalised areas in the South African context, have a historical reputation for physical and psychological trauma, where victims of crime and violence often develop trauma-related psychological disorders, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Eagle, 2015; Van Graan, 2021). Thus, the factor of past experiences is directly linked to the geographical context, in which the participants dwell.

Additionally, there was a consensus among the participants, that their experiences of parenting informed their ability to empathise with others in their community contexts, from a young age. For example, the researcher found that participants from marginalised communities often referred to their mothers or mother figures, as being the most influential individuals in their development of empathy, through the process of witnessing their loved one's hardships concerning finances, violence, abuse or neglect, which can be considered contextual/social factors. Thus, from a social community psychology lens, it is evident that how individuals are socialised in a multicultural context, plays a major role in the successful development of empathy. This highlights the aspects of South African culture and upbringing where some participants had exposure to crime, violence, and poverty, due to the remnants of the previously

oppressive Apartheid regime. This is shown in the quote, “*For example, like poverty [...] not having sufficient food, not having electricity, all of those things, like going to school without food, not knowing what you're going to eat [...]it affects how I feel for others*” (P2, 24, *M Research, two years and six months online*). This filters into current society and could impact how, and in what ways, individuals develop a sense of empathy for others, within their respective diverse communities (Ward & Dawes, 2012).

Interestingly, the researcher noted that the participants were more comfortable with providing examples of their lived experiences when defining and conceptualising empathy (see Appendix F), rather than defining empathy as a construct, in and of itself. This could provide a rationale as to why the participants struggled to adjust to the online learning curriculum, as lived/social experiences were not easily integrated into that particular learning space, during the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

5.3. Challenges Shifting from Face-to-Face to Online Learning Environments

In line with the above-mentioned section, participants expressed that they had difficulty shifting from a face-to-face (before the COVID-19 Pandemic) to an online learning environment (during the COVID-19 Pandemic), as human interaction was limited during the hard lockdown period. As mentioned in the literature, the COVID-19 hard lockdown period enforced social distancing where all individuals had to socially isolate themselves within their home environments to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus (Sifunda et al., 2021). This led to the participants feeling socially disconnected and, thus, isolated from educational staff and students. Furthermore, these feelings of social isolation and disconnection were exacerbated by the technical and practical challenges, whilst working in an online learning environment, especially in terms of group work or collaborative tasks.

Many participants stated that it was easier to interact with their supervisors before the COVID-19 Pandemic, as they could check in with their supervisor, in between classes, during

the day. However, during the hard lockdown, social interaction was limited to the online learning environment, which led to many participants struggling to communicate and pick up social cues via online communication methods, such as emailing. This is because many postgraduate psychology students struggled to navigate online supervision or mentoring sessions, in such a structured manner, as they were more comfortable with informal meetings during their face-to-face undergraduate degrees.

Additionally, the majority of participants focused on the importance of developing meaningful relationships with peers, who aimed to pursue careers in health-related professions. This links to the idea of imitating and reciprocating behaviours through social interactions, in a social community, as students often learn how to interact based on the behaviour of others (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018). Participants expressed a need to build a connection with their peers, as they can understand their particular university lifestyle, and share in a collective experience of higher learning. According to Hart and Wolff (2006), student experiences are shaped by 'university culture', in that students learn to develop social skills during this critical point in adolescent identity development. Therefore, this research study aims to serve as an encouragement for curriculum advisors and formulators to start thinking about alternatives and possible revisions to the present curriculum, as it is evitable that future pandemics will require creative and innovative thinking to enhance empathy development in a similar online/distance learning context.

5.3.1. The Importance of the Hidden Curriculum

Participants stated that they found it easier to communicate and interact with lecturers and peers during face-to-face learning environments, as opposed to learning online. During the interviews, the participants reflected on the importance of body language and the ability to interact with others, based on social cues. The participants acknowledged that face-to-face learning assisted them in better retaining the course content, as the experiences within the

classroom setting formed part of their learning. For example, one of the participants recalled that during a face-to-face class, the lecturer provided examples at each major point in the lecture, which aided the student in studying for the exam.

This extended into the participants' perceptions regarding understanding their peers' perspectives and being more attuned to the expectations of their lecturers during the respective programmes. According to Leonhardt and Peterson (2015), non-verbal communication operates in tandem with empathy, whereby up to forty-five percent of a conversation or social interaction can be lost, without the ability to interpret the underlying meanings associated with a particular physical human behaviour or action. Many participants identified that relying on verbal behaviour became problematic in the online learning environment, as peers were able to 'hide behind the screen' when engaging in class discussions. This prevented the informal aspects of learning, such as perspective or experience sharing amongst peers. This was best described in this quote, "*You don't really know somebody [...] you cannot judge based on their body language or anything like that*" (P7, 24, M Research, two years and six months online).

Therefore, the non-verbal barrier that occurred in online learning environments, could be explained by what is known as the 'hidden curriculum', which extends beyond the formal course content. The hidden curriculum differs from the formal curriculum in that it focuses on social skills which encourage or discourage behaviours based on what is deemed socially acceptable in the educational setting (Nahardani et al., 2022).

Thus, because the online learning environment did not allow for various social aspects of the traditional educational environment to flourish, the responsibility for ensuring that the hidden curriculum was maintained during the COVID-19 Pandemic, was expected to be upheld by educational staff (Nahardani et al., 2022). Therefore, the participants' experiences were greatly influenced by the involvement and opportunities for social development posed by the lecturing staff. In this study, the participants expressed varied experiences of supervision,

whereby the majority of participants noted a disinterest or frustration regarding the lack of support from their supervisors. This resulted in a vast majority of the participants feeling overwhelmed, anxious or confused about the thesis component of their respective postgraduate degrees. Based on Figure 3, in the previous section, it is evident that many of the participant's experiences were negative, due to the frequent use of negative language depicted by the height of the bars on the bar graph. This could be due to the lack of preparedness within the tertiary education curriculum to bring about opportunities for social development, under the challenging social conditions of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

5.3.2. Technical and Practical Challenges

Moreover, other well-noted challenges identified by the participants were technical and practical challenges; such as the fact that some participants did not have access to laptops, computers, cell phones, or data. Adding to this frustration, the implementation of load-shedding, where electricity was supplied via a schedule to certain areas within South Africa, often affected network coverage, which led to participants experiencing further frustration and anxiety. These frustrations extended into collaborative tasks, as participants acknowledged feeling a lack of empathy towards peers, who battled with online connectivity issues, as this delayed the completion of group tasks and assignments.

Furthermore, many participants disclosed that learning within their respective households posed various new hardships, which interfered with the online learning process. Examples of household challenges mentioned were; daily chores such as cooking and cleaning for the household, household disruptions, assisting with elderly family members' needs, general distractions, and limited social connection with friends. This particular challenge did not foster empathy amongst a majority of participants, as most participants often felt frustrated, anxious, disrespected, and overall noted a lack of empathy. This challenge was coupled with

feelings of guilt, as participants felt embarrassed or uneasy when discussing their experiences of their household distractions and hardships during student/supervisor online sessions.

It was evident, from the participants' experiences that their 'home' environment, as the main online learning space, was not very conducive to the process of developing the social skill of empathy. Schmidt (2020) refers to this type of 'home' learning, as distracted learning, because students learning in this environment are faced with many distractions and household expectations. Despite the challenges of online learning, participants within the healthcare field were expected to develop the skill of empathy to perform well, within their various future professions (Moudatsou et al., 2020).

This section links to Figure 4, in that, the feelings of social isolation form part of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which informed the narratives of the participants within this study. Additionally, Figure 4 highlights the linkage between the factors which inhibited the participant's empathy development (for example technological difficulties) and the impact of online learning, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, had on empathy development in this particular sample. Hence, this study serves as baseline knowledge that informs future research and potentially assists educational institutions in planning and preparing for future pandemics, especially concerning professional psychology programmes.

5.4. Importance of Empathy for Healthcare Practitioners

Moudatsou et al. (2020) discuss that empathy involves building and sustaining relationships with others, based on the individual's ability to understand a variety of contexts, deeming empathy essential in multiple professions. The participants echoed this sentiment, as they believed that empathy is one of the most fundamental aspects of being a research or clinical psychologist. This is emphasised in the quote, *"I think it's everything. I think that's the perfect way to describe it. I think that my ability to empathise is a huge part of who I am"* (P5, 25, *M Clinical, one year online*).

However, as depicted in this chapter, the online learning environment formed a barrier for many participants in their pursuit of developing empathy. This social disconnectedness from personal contact involved in face-to-face classes and fieldwork exercises led to participants feeling fearful and anxious when confronted with the idea of being ‘prepared’ to practice as a healthcare professional. This is because participants believed that their skill of empathy could only be developed through exposure to various contexts and fieldwork activities, within physical South African communities. However, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, most participants ‘missed out on’ the opportunity to engage in community work, as tertiary institutions were advised to practise social distancing by refraining from community outreach activities, to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (Hedding et al., 2020). Therefore, the participants expressed that these ‘missed opportunities’ led to a decrease in their empathy.

The complexities of defining empathy, at the beginning of this discussion, are highlighted in this section, as the participants acknowledged that multiple aspects contribute to empathy development that often go unnoticed. Răducu and Stănculescu (2021) noted that various social aspects of humanness, such as; resilience, adaptability and flexibility in thinking, work in conjunction and play a vital role in the ability of an individual to thrive in online learning environments, posed by global crises. These aspects were evident in the narrative of some participants, whilst were seemingly lacking in others.

This was showcased by the mixed experiences documented by the participants, regarding their empathy development during the pandemic, for example in the quote *“It’s actually based on a dual role for me like I feel two ways about it” (P4, 24, M Research, two years and six months online)*. Here, some participants thrived on thinking and engaging innovatively with clients or participants online, whereas others struggled to adapt to the complexities of technological applications and innovative ideas.

Therefore, to facilitate empathy development, in the future, this kind of discipline should perhaps only be conducted in a face-to-face learning environment, as the students struggle to develop these social skills online. This is shown in the participants' responses regarding increased frustration and anxiety about the course content during the COVID-19 Pandemic, as the course content could not be drastically changed due to the guidelines and structure outlined by the Healthcare Practitioners Council of South Africa (HPCSA). This consensus was encapsulated in the quote, *“In terms of the actual content of the course, I didn't feel like it changed very much from when it was face-to-face” (P10, 28, M Clinical, one year and six months online).*

A potential avenue in unpacking this notion whereby some participants reached a level of 'self-actualisation' or extending beyond the self (open to innovative ideas and thinking), whilst other participants did not reach this level, under the same conditions of online learning, could be explained by Maslow's (1943) Theory of Human Motivation. This theory states that lower (basic) needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, and security, need to be fulfilled and sustained before any human can reach the highest level of humanness, being self-actualisation (King-Hill, 2015). Thus, by using the perspective of Maslow's Theory (1943) to discuss different outcomes of empathy development, it could be stated that some participants felt more empathetic towards others because their basic needs were fulfilled which allowed them to succeed and think innovatively, in an online learning environment. Whereas, other participants felt a lack of empathy towards others, as they required resources and support to perform academically within the online learning environment. Importantly, Maslow's Theory (1943) emphasises that despite individuals existing in the same immediate context, for example; experiencing online learning, there are a variety of factors and needs that impact the chances of the individual successfully reaching their potential. However, this theory does not account

for the aspects of resilience and adaptability, which are often associated with individuals who thrive in adverse circumstances (Kenrick, 2017).

5.5. Framing Empathy Development during the COVID-19 Pandemic in terms of the Experiential Learning Theory

The Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which served as a theoretical framework guiding this study, postulates that the environment in which learning takes place must include space for self-reflection, as these environments shape learning experiences (Christian et al., 2021). This framework assisted in providing the researcher with a deeper understanding of how important the learning space is in developing the appropriate social skills to function within healthcare professions, where social exposure and interactions are expected. This framework positioned the researcher to understand why there were significant deviations in the depth of information provided by the participants, as most interviews were conducted in similar conditions to the online learning environment. The participants who had experienced online learning, for more than two years, expressed a deeper sense of social isolation from those within their learning environment, yet coped better when completing academic tasks, and communicating effectively online. According to the ELT framework, one of the most important stages in the learning model/cycle is that of – Reflective Observation, which impacts how the individual thinks and ultimately acts (McCarthy, 2016). This was evident in this study, where the participants expressed limited opportunities for self-reflection and interaction with lecturers/supervisors, which affected how they thought and interacted online. Therefore, by using this theoretical framework, the participants lived experiences remained the focus of the study, as well as provide an understanding as to the importance of an optimal learning environment through ‘learning by doing’ when obtaining a healthcare-related degree.

5.6. Chapter Summary

The researcher carefully navigated through the potential ways in which the findings could be interpreted, through active engagement in the supervision sessions. The researcher also remained immersed in the findings and available literature throughout the writing process and allowed the ELT framework to guide the discussion. Based on the findings in this study, the online learning environment increased feelings of social isolation and disconnection between peers and lecturers, predominately as a result of educational staff and students receiving limited training regarding the use of technology or having limited access to technological services. Overall, the participants who struggled to mirror, imitate or understand the behaviour and body language of those around them, hindered the natural progression of building meaningful friendships and professional networks, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This study aims to provide an opportunity for educational advisors and curriculum coordinators to strategically consider the impact of the hidden curriculum on social skill development.

The proceeding chapter will summarise the study, identify the limitations, and provide possible recommendations for future research.



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CHAPTER 6

6. SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSION

This study explored postgraduate psychology students' perceptions and experiences of empathy in an online learning environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. The online learning environment, enforced by the COVID-19 Pandemic, had a huge impact on the learning experiences discussed by the participants in this study. The ten participants that were interviewed, provided rich information as to the definition and factors involved in the development of empathy. The participant's perception of empathy impacted how they experienced empathy in an online learning environment, where social isolation and disconnection was noted as a common experience. Overall, it was found that the facilitation of empathy development, by educational staff, during the online learning environment led to a mixed response from participants. This included some participants feeling more empathetic, whilst others felt a lack of empathy, due to the experiences of learning online. This could impact how future research psychologists and clinical psychologists engage with clients or participants in their professional careers. However, the degree to which empathy could be underdeveloped within online learning environments remains unknown.

6.1. Summary

One of the main limitations for students studying in an online learning environment is that students have minimal opportunities to develop social skills (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Hence, this study unpacked both the perceptions and experiences of postgraduate psychology students in terms of empathy development, in a multicultural context, as well as within an online learning environment. This study also focused on the importance of empathy as a

communicative skill that participants would need in their professional career, as a research or clinical psychologist.

This study used a qualitative research design, where the participants were purposefully selected according to the inclusion criteria. Data was collected by the researcher through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted mainly online via the Zoom Platform, with one interview being held in a face-to-face setting. After the data was collected, it was analysed using the ATLAS.ti software programme, where the themes and sub-themes emerged. It is important to note that the researcher remained in a reflexive praxis throughout this study, to avoid imposing their perceptions and experiences of empathy on the data collection and analysis process.

Based on the discussion chapter, it was challenging for the postgraduate psychology students to agree upon a single definition of empathy in a multicultural context, as empathy should rather be understood as comprised of various components, such as kindness, love, compassion, and care, which stemmed from a deep sense of understanding multicultural contexts. The factors identified as having the most valuable impact on the postgraduate psychology students' empathy development, being; culture, parenting, religion, community and past experiences, were all factors which involved social and personal contact with community or family members. Therefore, from a social community psychology lens, it is evident that for any community, whether it is a student-based or local community, to thrive, empathy is needed as a core foundational cultural practice, as it unites and connects individuals who would otherwise be isolated from each other. Overall, this showcases that the online learning environment forms part of a much broader context that includes contextual/social factors, which have a direct influence on how the postgraduate psychology students experienced their studies, during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

It was evident that the elements which increased feelings of social isolation and disconnection were household hardships and challenges, as well as technological/practical challenges. Therefore, postgraduate psychology students felt isolated and disconnected from others within their immediate environment, as they could not engage with lecturers and classmates who provided the personal contact they longed for, during the process of learning. This extended into their feelings of preparedness to practice as healthcare professionals in their respective psychological fields, as they could not engage in community work, in comparison to other students who studied before the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The importance of empathy, as a construct, includes aspects of community service; such as community engagement and interaction. However, due to the Health Professionals Council of South Africa (HPCSA) accreditation of the Master's Psychology Programmes, at this particular HEI, the course content could not be adapted to account for the lack of social interaction in the online learning space, in a short period as demanded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, additional pressure was placed upon the educational staff to assist postgraduate psychology students in developing the social skill of empathy, whilst studying online. However, this study provided an in-depth exploration into the perceptions and experiences of postgraduate psychology students' empathy development in a multicultural context, as well as showcasing the importance of preparing the curriculum for the facilitation of empathy development during future pandemics. Here, the COVID-19 Pandemic is viewed, as a learning experience to improve on the current educational structures that have been put in place during this global crisis.

6.2. Recommendations

In terms of the participants that took part in this study, nine identified as female, while one participant identified as male. Therefore, in future research around this topic, it is advisable to have a more diverse sample in terms of the demographic; sex.

A major recommendation arising from this study is that Western constructs need to be explored and re-defined within multicultural (South African) contexts, as there is limited research regarding re-conceptualising topics, such as empathy. Additionally, there should be a greater focus on environmental or social factors which could influence optimal empathy development. Furthermore, the researcher noted significant gaps in the literature, regarding the possible linkages between empathy, culture, religion and ethnicity, as most Western academic literature focused on the importance of genetics and personality factors, in empathy development. The researcher noted that the factor – past experiences, in terms of empathy development, included a plethora of external factors, that are rooted within historically disadvantaged South African communities, such as; poverty, violence, crime and financial hardship, which although is not part of the scope of this study, should be further investigated. While adaptability and flexibility were identified as essential components of empathy development in the online learning space, further research on this relationship should be explored.

Moreover, the researcher was highly concerned as to the long-term effects social isolation and disconnection could have on the holistic health and well-being of students forced into online learning. However, many educational settings have more recently engaged in hybrid approaches to learning, which could alleviate the strain of social isolation and disconnection for many postgraduate psychology students. This could potentially influence the development of successful careers within their respective psychological fields, in the future, thus, healthcare professionals should perhaps be required to complete their degrees in face-to-face learning environments.

Additionally, the fact that most participants preferred to be interviewed online within their home environments, where their privacy was limited, could have prevented participants from sharing in-depth information with the researcher. Therefore, conducting a face-to-face

focus group, as a collectivistic approach to data collection, could provide a deeper insight into this topic.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

No research study is without limitations. In terms of the data collection process, the online interviews were often challenging due to poor network connectivity or the inability to view the participants' body language during the session.

It was evident that participants had varied levels of interest in certain questions regarding online learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic, as some participants had limited experiences with online learning (eight months) and others experienced online learning for more than two years. Those who have studied for longer periods in the online learning context were able to provide more personal experiences. The diversity in the participant's experiences could have limited the depth of information provided.

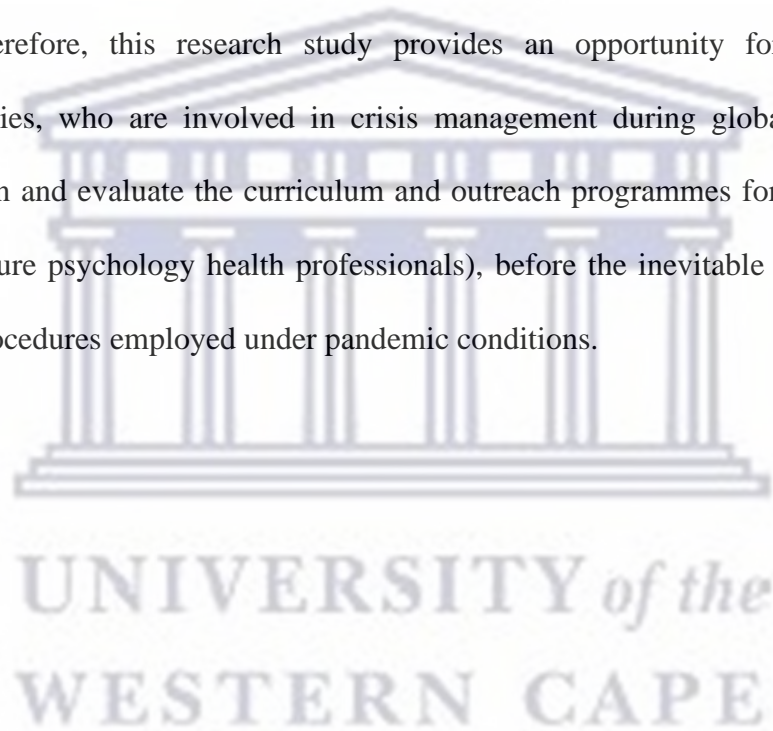
6.4. Conclusion

The findings of the study pivoted on two main ideas. Firstly, empathy is not easily defined within multicultural contexts, as empathy is multi-faceted and context-specific. Empathy, in a multicultural context, is a collectivist concept which does not rely on Western-based factors, but rather on the environment which facilitates the development of social skills. Therefore, empathy cannot be generalised or viewed as universal, but rather discussed within the specific contexts in which it exists. Secondly, the lack of social interaction during the period of online learning intensified feelings of social isolation and disconnection among postgraduate psychology students. Hence, feelings of frustration and anxiety often emerged in response to the challenges and hardships postgraduate psychology students faced. The mixed emotional response documented by postgraduate psychology students concerning their feelings of

preparedness to practice as future healthcare professionals indicates that there could be a need for capacity development for the cohort of professionals who graduated during the pandemic.

This research forms part of baseline academic information concerning the topic of empathy development, as a social skill, within both the educational and health-based learning environments, within multicultural contexts, and should be further expanded on as recommended.

Finally, this study aims to aid future researchers in understanding and acknowledging the importance of social connectedness and the hidden curriculum in learning environments, and its contribution to human behaviour and empathy development, especially during global pandemics. Therefore, this research study provides an opportunity for educators and educational bodies, who are involved in crisis management during global pandemics, to strategically plan and evaluate the curriculum and outreach programmes for specific student populations (future psychology health professionals), before the inevitable social distancing and isolation procedures employed under pandemic conditions.



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The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a stylized classical building with a pediment and columns.

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8. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Information Sheet (English)



UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

Private Bag X 17, Bellville 7535, South Africa

Tel: +27 21-959 2283 Fax: 27 21-959 3515

E-mail: tadonis@uwc.ac.za

17 March 2022

INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: Exploring Postgraduate Psychology Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Empathy in an Online Learning Environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

What is this study about?

This research project will be conducted by Amy-Jean Viljoen, a masters in research psychology student, at the University of the Western Cape. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because of your experience with education in an online learning or hybrid (face-to-face and online learning) environment, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of this research project is to explore postgraduate psychology students' perceptions and experiences of empathy and empathy development, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate?

You will be asked to be a participant in this study, whereby you will be interviewed individually regarding your experiences as a postgraduate student studying in an online or hybrid learning environment during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The interview questions will be based on your perceptions or if there was a potential change in your perception of empathy, due to online learning both in a multicultural context and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The second aspect will be a few questions about your experiences of empathy in terms of online learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic, where social interaction was

minimal. And lastly, a few questions will be based on the perceived importance of developing empathy. The interview will be roughly 30 - 45 minutes. Initially, you will be asked to provide educational information. After the interview you will be debriefed, meaning that the researcher will ask you how you experienced the interview and clarify any questions you may have.

Would my participation in this study be kept confidential?

The researchers undertake to protect your identity and the nature of your contribution. To ensure your anonymity, your information will be coded under a unique participant ID, where these codes will be placed on the collected data. All your information will be stored in a password-protected file to which only the interviewer and supervisor will have access. The interviewer will ensure you are fully informed of the study and that all information shared during the interview, with the researcher, is kept strictly confidential, and in alignment with the ethical guideline for the interview process. The interviewer will ask clarifying questions to check that your answers are portrayed as you intended, through a process called member checking. Another way of verifying information is through the researcher's persistent observation of the data, by reading and re-reading the data. Any reporting done in this study will be conducted with your identity being protected at all times.

What are the risks of this research?

This is a low-risk study, however, should you feel any discomfort or harm during this study, the researcher will make the appropriate referrals to suitable professionals to assist you further with interventions or assistance. There are always some risks involved with human interactions and therefore all possible risks will be reduced to the best of the researcher's ability, by being sensitive to your responses and taking into consideration the large-scale impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the lives of individuals.

For this reason, a contingency plan will be put in place for referrals;

- To the counselling services (021 959 2299) through the Centre for Student Support Service at UWC, for participants experiencing acute emotional upheavals or significant distress from the interview process.

- The South African Depression and Anxiety Group [SADAG] have a 24hour helpline 0800 456 789, which will also be used in the event that additional referrals are required.
- Free counselling services are available at Lifeline South Africa on 0861 322 322, in the event that you experience distress.

What are the benefits of this research?

There is no direct reward or benefit for participation. However, we hope that the research will provide a deeper understanding of the impact of online and hybrid learning programmes on the development of empathy, from the perspective of postgraduate master's psychology students. We hope that, in the future, other researchers, universities, and individuals might benefit from this study through an improved understanding of the topic. This study might provide additional information during a future time of crisis that affects the education system. Therefore, this study presents an opportunity for your voice and opinion to be heard, and for your experiences and point of view to be represented in psychological research.

Do I have to be in this research and may I stop participating at any time?

Participation is completely voluntary, and you will be asked to sign a consent form before any data is collected from you, should you wish to participate. If you chose to be a part of the research, which is completely up to you, and then change your mind at a later time, you can leave the study or end the interview. There will be no negative consequences if you choose to leave.

What if I have questions?

This research is being conducted by *Amy-Jean Viljoen*, under the supervision of *Dr Tracey-Ann Adonis* at the University of the Western Cape. If you have any questions about the research study itself, your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please feel free to contact;

Amy-Jean Viljoen

3850739@myuwc.ac.za

Dr Tracey-Ann Adonis

Department of Psychology

University of the Western Cape
Private Bag X17 Bellville
7535 tadonis@uwc.ac.za

Prof. Anita Padmanabhanunni

Head of Department: Psychology
University of the Western Cape

Private Bag X17 Bellville
7535
apadmana@uwc.ac.za

Dean of the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences:

Prof Anthea Rhoda

Dean of the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences

University of the Western Cape

Private Bag X17 Bellville

7535 chs-

deansoffice@uwc.ac.za

Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Private Bag X17, Bellville, 7535,

Tel +27 21 959 4111

This research has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

University of the Western Cape

Private Bag X17

Bellville

7535

Tel: 021 959 4111

e-mail: research-ethics@uwc.ac.za

Appendix B: Consent Form (English)

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

Private Bag X 17, Bellville 7535, South Africa

Tel: +27 21-959 2911

E-mail: 3850739@myuwc.ac.za

CONSENT FORM**Title of Research Project:**

Exploring Postgraduate Psychology Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Empathy in an Online Learning Environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

The study has been described to me in a language that I understand. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand what my participation will involve and I agree to participate of my own choice and free will. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed to anyone. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without fear of negative consequences or loss of benefits.

I agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study.

I do not agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study.

Participant's name.....

Participant's signature.....

Date.....

Appendix C: Ethics Clearance



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08 June 2022

Miss A Viljoen
Psychology
Faculty of Community and Health Sciences

HSSREC Reference Number: HS22/4/9

Project Title: Exploring Postgraduate Psychology Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Empathy in an Online Learning Environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Approval Period: 7 June 2022 – 7 June 2025

I hereby certify that the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape approved the methodology, and amendments to the ethics of the above mentioned research project.

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for approval.

Please remember to submit a progress report by 30 November each year for the duration of the project.

For permission to conduct research using student and/or staff data or to distribute research surveys/questionnaires please apply via:

<https://sites.google.com/uwc.ac.za/permissionresearch/home>

The permission letter must then be submitted to HSSREC for record keeping purposes.

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse events and/or termination of the study.

*Ms Patricia Josias
Research Ethics Committee Officer
University of the Western Cape*

NHREC Registration Number: HSSREC-130416-049

Director: Research Development
University of the Western Cape
Private Bag X 17
Bellville 7535
Republic of South Africa
Tel: +27 21 959 4111
Email: research-ethics@uwc.ac.za

FROM HOPE TO ACTION THROUGH KNOWLEDGE.

Appendix D: Permission from the University of the Western Cape



UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

DEAR **Amy-Jean Viljoen**

This serves as acknowledgement that you have obtained and presented the necessary ethical clearance and your institutional permission required to proceed with the project referenced below:

RESEARCH TOPIC

Exploring Postgraduate Psychology Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Empathy in an Online Learning Environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Name of researcher : Amy-Jean Viljoen
 Permission valid till : 7 June 2025
 Institution : University of the Western Cape
 Ethics reference : HS22/4/9
 Permission reference : UWCRP137237

You are required to engage this office (researchperm@uwc.ac.za) in advance if there is a need to continue with research outside of the stipulated period. The manner in which you conduct your research must be guided by the conditions set out in the annexed agreement. Conditions to guide research conducted at the University of the Western Cape.

Please be at liberty to contact this office should you require any assistance to conduct your research or require access to either staff or student contact information.

Regards
 Dr Ahmed Shaikjee
 Deputy Registrar Academic Administration

Approval status: **APPROVED** 10 June 2022

To verify or confirm the authenticity of this document please contact the University at researchperm@uwc.ac.za.



UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE
 Robert Sobukwe Road, Bellville, 7535, Republic of South Africa

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

Title: Exploring Postgraduate Psychology Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Empathy in an Online Learning Environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Section A

Participant Details

Participant ID	
Age	
Area of Residence	

Education

1. Where did you do your undergraduate degree?				
2. How many years have you experienced online learning since the start of your studies?	Undergraduate	Honours	Masters	Total Number of Years
3. What Masters Psychology (Structured) Programme are you registered for? (Clinical or Research Programme?)				
4. Are you currently experiencing; a face-to-face, online or hybrid lecturing approach?				

Section B – Content Questions:

Perceptions of Empathy

7. In your opinion, how would you define empathy?
8. How have your beliefs and/or culture influenced your perception of empathy?
9. When you were on campus (perhaps in your undergraduate or honours degree studies – depending on your previous institution) how you did frame your experience of empathy?
10. When you were in an online learning environment, how did this frame change (If at all)?
 - a.) If yes, can you provide an example of an experience that shifted your thinking around empathy?
 - b.) If not, why do you think this is the case?
11. What do you believe contributes to the development of empathy? Explain.
12. How do you think empathy is being developed or facilitated within the online learning environment?
 - a.) In terms of the course content?
 - b.) In terms of the engagement with lecturers, during lectures and supervision?
 - c.) In terms of engagement with peers/classmates?

Experience of Empathy

13. How did you experience empathy in an online learning environment?
 - a.) Can you provide an example of how you experienced empathy in an online environment?
14. What are the difficulties or challenges in terms of experiencing empathy in an online environment?

15. How has the lack of social connectedness during the COVID-19 Pandemic, influenced your experiences of empathy with your peers and with your lecturers?

16. How did the online learning environment affect your daily life and ability to empathize with others in your household or community?

Importance of empathy for future psychology professionals

17. Do you think that empathy is important in your professional career?

18. In general, how has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced how attuned you are, to those around you?

19. As a future psychologist, how has your experience of empathy during the pandemic, specifically within the online learning environment, affected your preparedness to practice as a healthcare professional?

Concluding Questions

20. Reflecting on the questions I have asked you in this session, how do you feel?

21. Do you have any questions for me?

22. Are there any additional comments you would like to make?

Thank you for participating
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Appendix F: Code Report (Factors Contributing to Empathy Development)

Project: Exploring Postgraduate Psychology Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Empathy in an Online Learning Environment, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Report created by Amy-Jean Viljoen on 2023/06/12

Code Report – Theme 1, Sub-theme 1: Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

Selected codes (25)

- **Influences: Behavioural conditioning**

1 Group:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

8:8 ¶ 16 in Participant 8

P: So, my background, definitely. I think personality, I would identify as an introvert, this is how I know myself to be but with that. But I could choose to really just be completely withdrawn and I would not actively participate in any kind of discussion I wouldn't expect to establish myself but I wouldn't be present in certain situations, right? But that is something that I choose because of the spaces that are meaningful to me, right? Like classes are meaningful the time we spend together is meaningful. So, showing up to me means something so I don't particularly think that it's personality. I don't know. I would call that because it's if I'm just thinking about it, it's if I had to go on personality alone or at least the trait that I presented to you that characterizes me as I wouldn't be present in a lot of the spaces. So, as I said before, maybe it's just backgrounding that just kind of been, you know, not particularly conditioned, but mostly just how you choose to relate to people and how you choose to show up in spaces. So, I don't know if personality and character are the same things. Think one's environment is a factor, right? If something occurs enough in my context, it's easy for me to think that's normal. But if I encounter people in other different kinds of contexts and environments, and the same thing is kind of open in their context, and they respond to it differently. I'm never going to know that in this particular way, or there is more

than one way for me to react to this thing. So, I hope I'm making sense. I think exposure is the word, exposure if I have never quite known something. Also, with that experience, I'm never going to if it's one thing for me right to sit and read about something or to watch it on the news. But if I'm in, again, another level that I'll give, which doesn't really relate to, okay, let's say for instance, before I worked right, or maybe in an interview setting, it's very easy for me to be like Okay, so I can really work really well with people. And then I'm actually working with people and, and that skill is kind of being developed in the process of actually doing it, but I can think I can write like with anything, I think I'm very practical. In terms of application even with a lot of things that we've been doing this isn't good. I'm either reading about it, but I'm never going to know if I can do it. Unless I'm doing it That's so frustrating and I feel like this year. Next year, we talk about this looming, you know, sort of next year internship when I'm like, I've never everything that I have, if I'm in the context of playing it, I think I'll not be able to know if I can actually do what I think I can do. So, I think experience is also a big part of that. But even genetics, I don't think it plays a role, background is much more important in having empathy, yeah because I seen what my parents do and I don't have to do it, like I can choose for myself.

● **Influences: Cultural differences**

1 Group:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

6:4 ¶ 6 in Participant 6

We say things like, oh my child is your child, like a child is raised by a village child. So everyone helps to raise that child. So in our culture, it's very important to be empathetic. It's something that's practiced a lot. From the olden days, I do feel that we are losing that sense of empathy, as everyone tries to be individualistic and do what they can on their own. But it's ingrained in our culture and those who follow the culture like myself, they know, they understand empathy. Even as a western influence, I think, as you move away from your area, like myself, for instance, I grew up in a very rural area, but I had to move to sort of like an urban area. There's a different way of living.

You don't really even know what your neighbour does. It's not important for you, everyone lives their own life. Unlike in the rural community where it's important to wake up and treat your neighbour. And it's important that when you meet them, you have a conversation with them and just find out where they are in life or how they're feeling. If they're sick, you can go visit them. Here, or in the urban area, when I say here, I'm referring to where I live. Now here, you don't even know when a person is sick. So there's a lot of practices that were over adopted, that are European, that allow us to live in our corners. And we do not practice empathy because of that.

- **Influences: Cultural independence**

1 Groups:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

5:3 ¶ 31 in Participant 5

P: In terms of my culture and beliefs, I wouldn't say that it really influenced it very much so, for me, think differently, how I grew up, influenced the way I saw empathy and how I witnessed empathy. But in terms of actual beliefs or cultures, not really, if that makes sense.

- **Influences: Cultural influence**

1 Group:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

2 Quotations:

6:42 ¶ 5 in Participant 6

I am an African woman, it's just that you can't see me, but I am black. So it's important for us to exercise empathy in our culture. When someone is believed, if there's a family, if there's a funeral, for instance, in our community, everyone goes to sort of help, just until the funeral passes, and then everyone can go back to their life. So there's that

element in our culture that teaches us to be very empathetic, to understand a situation that someone is in to try to be in their feelings, and sort of help them because of that. So in terms of culture, it's it's very important for us to be to be empathetic towards one another, we contribute, we sort of you just do this thing where you practice Ubuntu in a way, it's umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (zulu), it's you help me I help you, you know, that's how our culture is even the sayings that we practice in our culture.

8:2 ¶ 5 in Participant 8

P: Speaking beliefs. I'm just thinking about just like how I grew up and my conditioning was heavily emphasized. I think I grew up around people that are quite sensitive. And I think as a result that made me that way, too. But yeah, I was actually thinking about it. It was actually quite heavily emphasized. I do, I'm someone whom I think as a result of that, and someone who really well this is to try to be sort of considered to extend compassion to his to extend understanding.

● Influences: Culture

1 Group:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

12 Quotations:

1:4 ¶ 29 in Participant 1

P: That's interesting. So, in terms of belief, I am a Christian. So that kind of largely, I think, mainly influences my models, beliefs, the way I go about, you know, treating people, things like that. And so in terms of empathy, I think, you know, like I said, when its having an understanding and trying to relate to the person trying to give them that space, where they you know, to be able to go through what they go through what they go through and still kind of be there as a support for them. I think, terms of my belief systems, and kind of the way and just I, carry of myself and personality wise, I think I try to make a point to be empathetic towards people, purely because what I believe in is that everybody deserves to be understood, to be heard, to be supported, to be shown that kindness to. In terms of culturally, I also could have grown up in a Christian environment that's framed my upbringing. And people who have surround

myself also have that same beliefs. So I think culturally is and in terms of my belief, it's so intertwined that I have a general overview in terms of when I show empathy to, or I must show empathy to other people, because you don't know what people going through where they come from. And so I always strive to be someone that has empathy for other people. If I can, I mean, I tried to do that.

2:3 ¶ 28 in Participant 2

P: Yeah, it's so in my culture and my religion. So with regards to culture, so culturally be like your family, the people that you would live with. So for me, in terms of culture, I would say my family. So my family, like how I grew up, so my family is really like giving, you know, they always help each other. So that taught me like, if someone is in need of help, or assistance or anything, you should help them, you know, you should do it, like from your heart and help them. So that's how I grew up in terms of family, like, my family is like that. Like, if we have a ceremony here, that's not only going to depend on one person, but everyone is going to contribute, because they care, you know. Basically the concept of Ubuntu. So that's, that's, for me, that's how my culture has influenced my perception of empathy. You know, being there for each other, you know, togetherness, connectedness, connectedness, like, supporting each other all the time. So yeah, so I apply that into my life, as well. And also, when I meet people, I always try to be, you know, to show empathy, you know, to consider it to help people as much as I can, you know, so, yeah. And in terms of, like, religion, so that would be like, church, I would say, God, having a relationship with God has, has really influenced my perception of empathy, because God is a very giving God, you know, he's very kind, even in the Bible, he teaches us to be, you know, to be kind, even for the also teaches us that we must take care of the widows, you know, poor orphans, people don't have parents. So we have to help our neighbors. So in that sense, the Bible, you know, the word of God has influenced me to be more empathetic, to show sometimes to be considerate to help people out. And I tried to do that a lot, like, you know, give a give, when I have, like, if I have money, I would buy stuff for kids. You know, like I would give them lucky packets, and give them away to them? Yeah. So that kind of thing. Yeah. Okay, cool.

3:4 ¶ 5 in Participant 3

P: I think my beliefs have influenced my perception in the sense that I'm a Christian. So yeah, and you're supposed to be empathetic towards people, right? So there is a need to feel that way and to be empathetic. But in my culture, my perception is more like there's no pressure to be empathetic. As people feel different ways, and people don't generally understand the same things the same way. So I feel like there was a bit of struggle, trying to perceive empathy. Coming from a religious and then a more cultural standpoint.

4:3 ¶ 4 in Participant 4

I: Okay, awesome. So my next question for you is, how do you think that your beliefs or even culture has influenced your perception of empathy, If at all?

4:7 ¶ 15 in Participant 4

P: I feel like my life experiences have contributed towards my empathy towards other people, I don't feel comfortable saying too much but if I see someone going through what I have gone through, I would feel more for them and help them more, you know what I mean? So yeah, I do feel like my past experiences influenced my empathy. And if I did not experience what I experienced, I may not be able to fathom or perceive or comprehend what they are going through. So we won't be able to feel for them as much. I feel like all these experiences are connected like my personal life and in my community and family you know, yeah. But for me culture and religion I think play a role, but in my life they are two separate things, like I don't see the connection, yeah.

6:2 ¶ 4 in Participant 6

I: Yeah, awesome. Well, thank you for that. I think it just helps a little bit just to know what you think about it. So that when you ask the next question, you can sort of like, get I know what I said before. So just sort of helps you think about it, as well as we go. To my next question, How have your beliefs and or culture influenced your perception of empathy?

6:3 ¶ 5 in Participant 6

P: I am an African woman, it's just that you can't see me, but I am black. So it's important for us to exercise empathy in our culture. When someone is believed, if there's a family, if there's a funeral, for instance, in our community, everyone goes to

sort of help, just until the funeral passes, and then everyone can go back to their life. So there's that element in our culture that teaches us to be very empathetic, to understand a situation that someone is in to try to be in their feelings, and sort of help them because of that. So in terms of culture, it's it's very important for us to be to be empathetic towards one another, we contribute, we sort of you just do this thing where you practice Ubuntu in a way, it's umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (zulu), it's you help me I help you, you know, that's how our culture is even the sayings that we practice in our culture.

6:10 ¶ 15 in Participant 6

One other thing it's definitely culture. And, and it's a bringing also, even because sometimes culture says you must have empathy, but the way you're brought up like other children are not brought up as, as the culture prescribes. So the culture says you must greet but your family doesn't really practice greeting. So to you, it's not something important. So I think upbringing could then be a, because how your parents really are empathetic towards you, influences how you are to other people. I mean, you'll see this even with little children in school that are not taken care of at home. If this child does not know love, does not know the child does not understand that it's important to care for the next person, then they will not practice it. So it's important, the way that they are brought up the way that we are brought up I feel also contributes to the development of empathy.

6:11 ¶ 16 in Participant 6

But yes, I don't think empathy can be genetic. I don't think it can be inherited in any way. Because I don't think it's biological or I think it's socially constructed. So I don't think it can be inherited. I think it's something you learn through socialisation and the people that you are around and the people that bring you up and the cultures and the principles and the values that you're brought up on, I think.

7:3 ¶ 28 in Participant 7

I: Awesome, thanks so much for that. So how has your beliefs or potentially your culture influenced your perceptions of empathy?

8:3 ¶ 6 in Participant 8

I: And so like, maybe, in terms of the communities that you grew up in a shape that has a major influence?

9:4 ¶ 7 in Participant 9

P: I'm not necessarily No, wouldn't say that. I think that's probably the cultural role of it. And, of course, I'm trying to actively debunk that, but still very much visible, whether unconsciously or not, me observing it, and me, at times, deciding not to be put myself in someone else's shoes, because I feel like, I already have my own shoes. And it's like, is that really an empathetic if I'm considering my own shoes above the next person's shoes? So it's like, it's very interesting. It's a personally speaking cultural outside of culture. It's more of a, how selfless do I want to be? certain points in time require you to be selfless. But a lot of times you require to be more selfish and be like, No, I'm putting my shoes on. Before I even do anything else. And until I have the means I'm comfortable enough in my shoes that I might try and step outside that and understand someone else. So there's a lot of aspects of selflessness and selfishness within myself personally, outside of the cultural influences.

● Influences: Environmental factors

1 Groups:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

8:8 ¶ 16 in Participant 8

P: So, my background, definitely. I think personality, I would identify as an introvert, this is how I know myself to be but with that. But I could choose to really just be completely withdrawn and I would not actively participate in any kind of discussion I wouldn't expect to establish myself but I wouldn't be present in certain situations, right? But that is something that I choose because of the spaces that are meaningful to me, right? Like classes are meaningful the time we spend together is meaningful. So, showing up to me means something so I don't particularly think that it's personality. I don't know. I would call that because it's if I'm just thinking about it, it's if I had to go on personality alone or at least the trait that I presented to you that characterizes me as

I wouldn't be present in a lot of the spaces. So, as I said before, maybe it's just backgrounding that just kind of been, you know, not particularly conditioned, but mostly just how you choose to relate to people and how you choose to show up in spaces. So, I don't know if personality and character are the same things. Think one's environment is a factor, right? If something occurs enough in my context, it's easy for me to think that's normal. But if I encounter people in other different kinds of contexts and environments, and the same thing is kind of open in their context, and they respond to it differently. I'm never going to know that in this particular way, or there is more than one way for me to react to this thing. So, I hope I'm making sense. I think exposure is the word, exposure if I have never quite known something. Also, with that experience, I'm never going to if it's one thing for me right to sit and read about something or to watch it on the news. But if I'm in, again, another level that I'll give, which doesn't really relate to, okay, let's say for instance, before I worked right, or maybe in an interview setting, it's very easy for me to be like Okay, so I can really work really well with people. And then I'm actually working with people and, and that skill is kind of being developed in the process of actually doing it, but I can think I can write like with anything, I think I'm very practical. In terms of application even with a lot of things that we've been doing this isn't good. I'm either reading about it, but I'm never going to know if I can do it. Unless I'm doing it That's so frustrating and I feel like this year. Next year, we talk about this looming, you know, sort of next year internship when I'm like, I've never everything that I have, if I'm in the context of playing it, I think I'll not be able to know if I can actually do what I think I can do. So, I think experience is also a big part of that. But even genetics, I don't think it plays a role, background is much more important in having empathy, yeah because I seen what my parents do and I don't have to do it, like I can choose for myself.

● **Influences: Family bonding**

1 Group:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

10:30 ¶ 66 in Participant 10

P: I think you even though there was a sense of even though there was a sense of isolation from friends and family members, I again, was fortunate enough to have my dad and my mom quite close, like, I mean, like, across the road close to my husband. So, I was able to spend a lot more time with my parents, my dad also worked overseas for quite a long time. And he also came back as the Pandemic started, which was such a blessing for me, because he'd been away for so long. Now, we had him here, like, consistently, you know, in our space, and so on. And so, you know, I was able to, almost, I don't want to say get that back, because I don't think one can get that back. But I was able to form, like, a new connection, a new relationship with, with both of my parents, you know, in a setting where we had nothing else to do by, sort of entertain one another, and be in one another's conversations and, uh, you know, connect over dinners and sitting around the table, and, you know, that type of thing. So, I think there was a greater sense of closeness between my very immediate family and myself.

- **Influences: Family influence**

1 Groups:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

2 Quotations:

5:38 ¶ 46 in Participant 5

I would say background and parenting. I would also, as you said, adversity and going through, I think going through a lot can change the way you feel about other people. And I think it can put things into perspective for you. So I think that definitely increases empathy. Trying to think what else I would say, maybe just give me a moment, let me think about it.

6:10 ¶ 15 in Participant 6

One other thing it's definitely culture. And, and it's a bringing also, even because sometimes culture says you must have empathy, but the way you're brought up like other children are not brought up as, as the culture prescribes. So the culture says you must greet but your family doesn't really practice greeting. So to you, it's not something important. So I think upbringing could then be a, because how your parents really are

empathetic towards you, influences how you are to other people. I mean, you'll see this even with little children in school that are not taken care of at home. If this child does not know love, does not know the child does not understand that it's important to care for the next person, then they will not practice it. So it's important, the way that they are brought up the way that we are brought up I feel also contributes to the development of empathy.

- **Influences: Family values**

1 Groups:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

2:7 ¶ 34 in Participant 2

P: So okay, I'm going to point out a few things. So the first thing I would say contributes towards that is my mother. And my mother is a really empathetic person. And she's very kind, even when people you know betray her or hurt her, she still manages to somehow forgive them, and still give to those people without actually, you know, holding a grudge, you know, or calling them out anything. They don't even have to suffer consequences, for that matter. So she's always been like an empathetic person, which shows that even when people do bad things to you, you can still remain who you are, you don't have to change who you are, because people, you know, do certain things to you. So for me, she has influenced me in that manner, like to always be true to this to always stay true to you to who you are. And always show compassion, be empathetic towards people be kind, you know, you can't change your kindness if you can do kind person, you know, so she definitely influenced me, it's me like that and also, like I said, my friend, you know, them like working together, the connectedness and family, you know, that philosophy of Ubuntu, you know, it's evident in the family. So you can see it, that, you know, in the family, people help each other out. So if you host something in the family, no one, everyone is going to contribute towards that, you're not going to financially do that alone. So you're not going to struggle financially, and everyone is going to struggle with you, you know, usually we have meetings in the family, where everyone you know is our going to do or contribute towards, so those

kinds of things. So the connectedness in the family that has influenced or as affected, you know, also. And also, like I said, the Bible, like God, the relationship I have, with God, you know, my spirituality with God has influenced me, you know, on my empathetic development. Like I said, so, you know, the teachings in the Bible, of how to treat people, that has influenced me a lot. The relationship that I have with God has really shaped me, because before that, like before church before God, you know, I was in high school. I used to go to church, but then I didn't have an understanding, you know, of who God was. So I was just going to church, because my family is going to church for the sake of going to church, but then when I got to understand who God was, what he stood for his teachings, and everything, and then I got to, I want it to be like, a reflection of him, basically, you know, because he is very kind, he is very giving. So I wanted to be that person, you know, so the relationship, spiritual relationship I have with God has influenced my, you know, empathy development, you know, I am empathetic, you know, unkind towards people love that because of relationship I have with quite an also God wouldn't want me to be a cruel person, you know, because I would hurt him. So those kinds of things. So yeah. And also, me being diagnosed with depression and anxiety has contributed towards my empathetic development. Because I got to see, like, you know, from a personal experience, how it's like to be depressed, and like, what it's like for people who like, so let me say, I have depression, but obviously, there are factors that contributed towards that. So, for example, like poverty, you know, which is one of the things having to worry about food, you know, in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, not having sufficient food, not having electricity, you know, all of those things, like going to school without food, not knowing what you're going to eat. So those kinds of things. So, you know, you see those factors that contributed towards my anxiety and depression made me see how actually people like to struggle, you know, with poverty, how they deal with that, how they cope in that situation, you know, the struggles. So if I have money now, you know, I, if I have enough money, and I can see someone who's struggling, I'm able to buy them some food, I'm able to share my money, you know, even with friends you know, if I have money, I will share it. Now, never watch someone eat in front of me, I just don't like that.

- **Influences: Gender roles and Culture**

1 Groups:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

9:2 ¶ 5 in Participant 9

P: Oh, man, I've always been conflicted with that idea of empathy. Because ubuntu exists, it's encouraged. But practically speaking, it's not always practice. There's hope that makes sense. And it also taps into the ideas of what a man is, culturally speaking. Also, it's not always someone who's considered to be intuitive feelings are empathetic, because that being empathetic is also putting yourself in someone else's shoes and understanding how that person feels. And then that's not always a thing as explicitly encouraged or if I might even stretch it. It's not even. It's more discouraged implicitly and even explicitly then encourage so it's like this whole idea of how a man should act. And that influences how empathetic he might not be or you would be. So that's that there's also that added layer to how one is empathetic to the next person.

- **Influences: Genetics**

2 Groups:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

9:11 ¶ 16 in Participant 9

P: I would probably link aspects of genetics to personality also. Okay. how some people are, have a different temperament, are more patient and agreeable. So all these other aspects are more outgoing and extroverted because a lot of extroverted people will more likely bridge and break that barrier of constantly communicating with your peers or your students or whatever. And someone who is more introverted might not actually engage in that way, but still very much of the empathetic so. So and like that temperament aspect is a personality and looking at the genetics and how the parents also had the specific characteristics. These are linked in some ways.

- **Influences: Influence of others**

- 1 Group:**

- Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

- 1 Quotations:**

- 2:9 ¶ 38 in Participant 2**

- P: So not the content, not the content. I would say that students definitely influenced my empathy in an online space, okay. So obviously, one of the students is my friend, so. Yeah, yeah. But she, you know, influenced my empathic development or the question that you were asking. Yeah, I'd say my students. And also maybe Prof, she had a lot of empathy for me, which helped a lot.

- **Influences: Influence of upbringing or background**

- 1 Group:**

- Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

- 1 Quotations:**

- 1:8 ¶ 34 in Participant 1**

- I: Thank you very much for that. And then my other question is also a thinking question. What do you believe, contributes to the development of empathy? So when I say that now, you're sort of thinking about it a little bit. But when I say contribute, when I was thinking about this question myself, I thought about if I had to take something away from my experience, how much would that contribute to empathy, because you've obviously grown up in a certain way as you sometimes, we don't realize how much say, for example, our background or environment is affecting us, because we just love it, we just so normal to us, whatever is normal to us, doesn't mean it's normal to everybody. So, I think that's sort of where I want your mind to go. So, if you don't mind answering that. I'll repeat it for you. What do you believe contributes to the development of empathy?

1 Quotations:

4:7 ¶ 15 in Participant 4

P: I feel like my life experiences have contributed towards my empathy towards other people, I don't feel comfortable saying too much but if I see someone going through what I have gone through, I would feel more for them and help them more, you know what I mean? So yeah, I do feel like my past experiences influenced my empathy. And if I did not experience what I experienced, I may not be able to fathom or perceive or comprehend what they are going through. So we won't be able to feel for them as much. I feel like all these experiences are connected like my personal life and in my community and family you know, yeah. But for me culture and religion I think play a role, but in my life they are two separate things, like I don't see the connection, yeah.

● Influences: Nature vs. Nurture

2 Groups:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

1 Quotations:

7:13 ¶ 39 in Participant 7

P: Yes definitely, definitely. But even like genetics, you know, I am not keen on that I think for me, the reason why I'm not really keen on genetics is because of my experiences. And like, my dad, like, for instance, my daddy is a drug addict. But at the end of the day, I never turned out like that, you know what I mean? So then is it really genetics or is it just your way of upbringings, it because your parents were not empathetic towards you that you ended up being cold? And you know what I mean? So I personally feel that it's not really genetics, but I really do feel that it is your connection with regards to your parents, how they, if warm enough to you, was there love? Did they show empathy towards you that shaped your empathy? You know what I mean? So I question if genetics plays a role.

5:13 ¶ 46 in Participant 5

P: I would definitely say, parenting and, and like family background and how you grew up? And yeah, I think in terms of parenting, how, you know, you are cared for or maybe if your parents almost, I wouldn't say explicitly say, like, think about other person, but if they encourage that behaviour with, you know, you, as a kid already, you start thinking about the other person, or why you made that child cry or something like that. I definitely think that could have an impact. You know, so I would say background and parenting. I would also, as you said, adversity and going through, I think going through a lot can change the way you feel about other people. And I think it can put things into perspective for you. So I think that definitely increases empathy. Trying to think what else I would say, maybe just give me a moment, let me think about it.

- **Influences: Religious influences**

1 Group:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

2 Quotations:

2:7 ¶ 34 in Participant 2

I used to go to church, but then I didn't have an understanding, you know, of who God was. So I was just going to church, because my family is going to church for the sake of going to church, but then when I got to understand who God was, what he stood for his teachings, and everything, and then I got to, I want it to be like, a reflection of him, basically, you know, because he is very kind, he is very giving. So I wanted to be that person, you know, so the relationship, spiritual relationship I have with God has influenced my, you know, empathy development, you know, I am empathetic, you know, unkind towards people love that because of relationship I have with quite an also God wouldn't want me to be a cruel person, you know, because I would hurt him.

10:36 ¶ 30 in Participant 10

I think my beliefs like my Christianity, religion, and so it sort of grounds you, it grounds me in myself, and how I see the world and how I see others. And so our first point, according to the Bible, is to love others. First of all, I think that takes on a

different view for a lot of people. And I think that plays so much into empathy. You know, it's it's showing compassion, it's showing kindness. It's showing that type of understanding, no matter what someone is going through.

- **Influences: Upbringing**

1 Group:

Factors Contributing to Empathy Development

2 Quotations:

6:10 ¶ 15 in Participant 6

One other thing it's definitely culture. And, and it's a bringing also, even because sometimes culture says you must have empathy, but the way you're brought up like other children are not brought up as, as the culture prescribes. So the culture says you must greet but your family doesn't really practice greeting. So to you, it's not something important. So I think upbringing could then be a, because how your parents really are empathetic towards you, influences how you are to other people. I mean, you'll see this even with little children in school that are not taken care of at home. If this child does not know love, does not know the child does not understand that it's important to care for the next person, then they will not practice it. So it's important, the way that they are brought up the way that we are brought up I feel also contributes to the development of empathy.

7:13 ¶ 39 in Participant 7

P: Yes definitely, definitely. But even like genetics, you know, I am not keen on that I think for me, the reason why I'm not really keen on genetics is because of my experiences. And like, my dad, like, for instance, my daddy is a drug addict. But at the end of the day, I never turned out like that, you know what I mean? So then is it really genetics or is it just your way of upbringing? Is it because your parents were not empathetic towards you that you ended up being cold? And you know what I mean? So I personally feel that it's not really genetics, but I really do feel that it is your connection with regards to your parents, how they, if warm enough to you, was there

love? Did they show empathy towards you that shaped your empathy? You know what I mean? So I question if genetics plays a role.

