We Can Lift Each Other Up: Reimagining a Mental Health Intervention as a Critical Service-Learning Initiative

Lindsay Kelland, Rhodes University

Abstract

In this paper, I suggest that 'SHAER: Storytelling for Health, Acknowledgment, Expression and Recovery' can be reimagined as a critical service-learning initiative. This suggestion is based on trying to make sense of two unexpected outcomes of implementing a mental-health intervention for women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Makhanda, South Africa. I argue that while SHAER was initially conceived as a mental health intervention, it creates an open space characterised by mutual recognition in which participants appear to others – disclose their identity and reality – and develop a critical consciousness. Drawing on the unexpected centrality of forward-looking, agency-affirming narratives of motherhood, rather than backward-looking, victim or survivor-centred 'trauma stories', I propose that SHAER offers a model for transformative community engagement in higher education institutions in South Africa. In its barest form, SHAER can be seen as a platform for fostering relational agency, self-authorship, and solidarity through narrative exchange and recognition. As such, SHAER aligns with the aims of what Tania Mitchell calls critical service-learning and John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley call democratic civic engagement, and offers a powerful model for embedding community engagement within the academic project.

Keywords: *storytelling, narrative understanding, engaged scholarship, mental-health intervention, critical service-learning, democratic civic engagement*

Introduction

This paper is a response to two calls – first, to the call for higher education in South Africa to be responsive to local socio-economic concerns, and second, for academic research to lead to implementable community engagement in the higher education landscape. It also hopes to further the aim of the *African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement* by "[contributing] to building a body of knowledge on Community Engagement for the

African continent". The suggestion made here is that 'SHAER: Storytelling for Health, Acknowledgement, Expression, and Recovery' – a mental health intervention for women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence – be reimagined as a critical service-learning initiative. This suggestion is based on two unexpected outcomes of engaged scholarship in which I co-facilitated SHAER in Makhanda, South Africa, with a local NGO and survivors of gender-based violence from the community.

This paper explores the SHAER framework and rationale, as well as findings and recommendations from earlier iterations of SHAER, to frame my interest and involvement in SHAER and the unexpected findings of implementing it in Makhanda. Exploring the potential meaning of these outcomes, and the suggestion I make based on this meaning – that SHAER be reimagined as a service-learning initiative – are the focal points of this paper.

Given these aims, this narrative-style paper may not read like a typical research article reporting on engaged research. However, as a philosopher stepping outside her comfort zone, I attempt to contribute conceptually to the scholarship of engagement, albeit in an unconventional way.

The paper is structured in the following way to pull a thread through the disparate ideas I have drawn on to understand the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, and to arrive at the suggestion that SHAER be reimagined as a critical service-learning initiative:

- Part 1 explores SHAER – its aims, design, and findings and recommendations emanating from earlier iterations of SHAER in Turkey and Afghanistan – to frame my interest in SHAER as a form of engaged scholarship, as well as the implementation of SHAER in Makhanda.

- In Part 2, I turn to SHAER: Makhanda, highlighting two unexpected outcomes and pointing to literature that enables me to explore the significance of these outcomes in our context.

- Finally, in Part 3, I suggest that while SHAER is designed as a mental health intervention, it can be reimagined as a service-learning initiative.

Before I do this, I want to acknowledge that in exploring the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda – and particularly the centrality of motherhood in the stories of our participants – I am mindful of my positionality in South Africa as a white, middle-class woman and a Western-trained feminist philosopher, and, given this, of the possibility of distorting the meaning(s) of motherhood – an identity that pervaded the stories told. The reason for this qualifier will, I hope, become clearer as the paper unfolds. Before diving into Part 1, I turn briefly to the theoretical framing of the study and this paper.

Theoretical framing

My interest in SHAER stemmed from work as a feminist philosopher on recovery from the harm of rape. In my PhD and subsequent philosophical exploration this subject (Kelland, 2012, 2016), I was inspired by feminist philosopher Susan Brison (2002), who argues that recovery requires sharing a narrative of one's experience with a supportive audience. Her account of recovery is fundamentally relational, and centres regaining control and a sense of one's voice in the aftermath of rape. To borrow her words:

> [T]he self is both autonomous and socially dependent … narrating memories to others (who are strong and empathic enough to be able to listen) enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by the trauma. … helping the survivor to remake a self (Brison, 2002, pp. 38–71).

In 'A Narrative Model of Recovery' (2012), I supplemented Brison's relational account with a robust account of the explanatory force of narrative. Drawing on the work of David Velleman (2003, 2006) and Peter Goldie (2003), I suggested that further to regaining control over one's traumatic memories and a sense of one's voice in the presence of others, having a narrative of one's experience enables one to resolve an emotional cadence (Velleman, 2003) and come to understand what one's experience *means* – knowing how one *feels* about and *judges* the experience. Creating a narrative of one's experience promotes greater self-understanding, which is required for the control necessary for agency and personhood in philosophical accounts of the same. In Velleman's (2003, p. 1) words: "a story does more than recount events; it recounts events in a way that renders them intelligible, thus conveying not just information but also understanding." Goldie (2003) also emphasises narrative construction and storytelling in cultivating one's sense of self, providing further support for the idea that having narrative understanding of one's experience allows one to "remake a self" (Brison, 2002, p. 71). For Goldie, engaging with, evaluating, and responding emotionally to events in our past is an essential part of what it means to have a narrative sense of self. Narrative, then, for these thinkers, is embedded in and influences our lives. In Goldie's words:

> We think, talk and write about our lives as narratives, and our doing this can profoundly affect our lives as such, in our engagement with, and response to, our past lives, and in our practical reasoning about what to do in the future. (Goldie, 2003, p. 303)

Moreover, engaging with feminist work on consciousness-raising – including that of Drucilla Cornell (2000), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), bell hooks (2000) Cricket Keating (2005), and Tasha Dubriwny (2005) – led me to believe that changing one's perspective may enable one to acknowledge different meanings, and that engaging in feminist consciousness-raising activities could enable important shifts in perspective. As Dubriwny (2005, p. 401) puts it:

> *The practice of consciousness-raising is one that exemplifies the process of giving individual experiences new meanings by moving them into the realm of social reality… the telling of personal narratives such as those used in consciousness-raising sessions provides a way in which lived experiences are "translated" for both a wider audience and for the teller of the story.*

Furthering my earlier suggestions, in later work (2016), I argued that consciousness-raising could provide women with new language, concepts, and ways of perceiving their experience and allow them to position these experiences within the social structures of patriarchy while also developing the bonds of solidarity among survivors necessary for political mobilisation. These opportunities, I suggested, subvert the need for survivors to draw on canonical narratives that may further the interests of patriarchal forces and lead to experiences of self-blame, guilt, and doubt.

This is the lens that I brought to SHAER: Makhanda and to the writing of this paper.

Part 1: SHAER

'SHAER' is a mental health intervention designed to empower survivors of sexual or gender-based violence in high-prevalence settings where women may not have easy or affordable access to support. The intervention was designed by a network of scholars and activists from the medical sciences and humanities around a series of participatory storytelling sessions that aim to cultivate a 'story circle' in which women can (co-)construct stories, foster an image of self that exceeds their experiences of violence, and challenge societal narratives surrounding gender and violence. The intervention has transformational aims at both individual and collective levels: recovery through the promotion of support, self-reflection, and awareness, and thereby agency – individual empowerment – and the transformation of society through directed action based on a collective identity or solidarity combined with critical consciousness. Recognition plays a central role in transformation at both levels – individually when one is seen and heard, and socially through community-building.

SHAER is divided into six sessions, all designed to last around 3 hours, entitled Trust Building Activities, The History of Storytelling, Life Story Mapping, Story Circles, Spreading a Story, and Celebrate. The first session forms the story circle – exploring expectations, setting up rules of engagement – including trust, confidentiality, and cooperation – and emphasising listening skills. The second examines the role of stories in conveying history, preserving knowledge, and shaping the values of different cultures, as well as the power of storytelling in participants' own lives. Participants explore early experiences of storytelling and the value of reflecting on their stories, especially those concerning formative moments. The third session focuses on life-story mapping and explores milestones and transitions shaping participants' lives and identities; aiming to reveal not only how we understand our lives through stories but also how we are shaped by the stories we live, tell, and hear, and that "[b]ecoming more conscious of our story can help us become, more clearly, the author of our future" (SHAER facilitator's training manual).

Through sharing their memories, participants reflect on how the past has impacted the present, influencing how they feel, relate to others, and interpret experiences. During the activities in this session, participants identify common experiences or themes "to draw out the similarities that connect [them], and the differences that can be better understood and overcome" and are encouraged "to focus on [those] areas that are most likely to bring well-being and freedom" (Training Manual). In the fourth session, participants share personal stories with the circle. They begin by selecting a topic and the message they wish their story to convey. They then explore together how they will tell their stories, thinking about the central character(s), their situation, the plot, any dramatic moments in the story, and the outcome of the story. At each stage, participants share their ideas and provide feedback in dialogue. When they have developed their stories, they share them in what is now a receptive space.

In the fifth session, participants discuss the potential for stories to promote the public good through sharing lessons learned to empower and encourage understanding, and create a collective story to share with their community. The final session celebrates what the participants have learned in their time together, and reviews and assesses the sessions, considering expectations at the outset.

Storytelling is often used in interventions designed to offer support to trauma survivors (Martin et al., 2019; Senehi, 2002; Weatherall, 2020). Most interventions of this kind focus on the sharing of backward-looking stories of the traumatic experience(s) – or 'trauma stories' – and the individual and socially transformative potential of doing so (Jirek, 2017; Martin et al., 2019). Research on previous iterations of SHAER (Mwaba et al., 2021; Mannell et al., 2018; Ahmad et al., 2022) also supports the use of storytelling in recovery and provides evidence of the positive impact of SHAER on survivors. In both cases, storytelling was shown to be empowering for the women involved. Stories allowed them to acknowledge and process their trauma with the validation and recognition of others, to develop positive social identities and enact their agency, "create landscapes of resistance" (Ahmad et al., 2022, p. 530), and challenge social structures. However, in addition, these studies inspire questions about how to conceive of the power and agency of women survivors as culturally specific, situated subjects. Campbell and Mannell (2016), for instance, urge us to explore key but often overlooked markers of women's agency when engaging in interventions of this kind – such as mobilising support from other women – that are grounded in "the ways women themselves [make] sense of their lives" (2016, p. 5). These questions and recommendations were formative of how I made sense of the outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, and the suggestion I make of reimagining SHAER as a critical service-learning initiative.

When I learned of SHAER from Sharli Paphitis, who was part of this original network, my interest lay in the backward-looking stories upon which most interventions focus. However, again, my interest sprang from a philosophical (and so *purely* conceptual) interest in the role of narrative understanding (particularly when informed by feminist consciousness) in the recovery of rape survivors. I had never engaged in empirical research exploring what I

took to be part of the recovery journey. When she asked me to implement SHAER in South Africa, I was excited about being involved in work that could have a tangible impact on the lives of survivors in my community (as philosophy has a notoriously slow trickle-down effect if not actively taken beyond academia) but also daunted by the prospect of engaging with communities (as philosophy is a notoriously 'blue-skies' discipline). Where I had been *thinking about* narrative in the role of recovery, this project presented the opportunity to put philosophy into practice or see theories emanating from feminist ethics and narrative theory at work.

Part 2: SHAER: Makhanda

South Africa is plagued by sexual and gender-based violence. It is estimated that one in three South African women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime, and that the rate at which women are killed by intimate partners in South Africa is five times the global average (Govender, 2023). Women and gendered and sexual minorities are confronted with a daily *milieu* in which violence is often seen as normal and inevitable (Jewkes et al., 2011; Sibanda-Moyo et al., 2017; Gqola, 2015; Gqola, 2021) In certain circumstances – when it comes to regulating the status quo – S/GBV is even deemed legitimate or prescribed (Kelland, 2024). What is known as 'the scourge' of sexual violence in South Africa exists within a culture in which violence is arguably the norm.

Makhanda is a small city in the Eastern Cape Province, simultaneously characterised as a centre of educational excellence and material poverty. One-third of the city is suburban and hosts elite private schools and Rhodes University. The other two-thirds is constituted by sprawling peri-urban spaces, the material reality of which stands in stark contradistinction from the other third of the city. SHAER was facilitated in Makhanda's peri-urban spaces – known to suburban residents as Grahamstown East – Grahamstown being the previous (colonial) name for our city – and to township residents as eRhini. Characteristic of South Africa, Makhanda is plagued by S/GBV, much of which is perpetrated by partners or those known to women survivors. In the words of the participants in SHAER: Makhanda:

> *"People are dying in the hands of their partners. Children are dying in the hands of men."*

Given that I am a philosopher, the request to implement SHAER in Makhanda brought with it the *practical* and *ethical* necessity of engaged scholarship with local partners who were qualified to hold a space that was constituted by survivors of violence and explicitly directed toward providing them with support in the aftermath of their trauma. These, among other potential risks and significant ethical considerations involved in facilitating SHAER, needed to be carefully considered and planned for. Before applying for ethical clearance implement the intervention in our community, the research team, Sharli Paphitis (Kings College, London) and I, supported by Jenevieve Mannell (University College, London), approached and partnered with the Raphael Centre – a local NGO working to improve the well-being of women, often affected by S/GBV and HIV, in the community, with the expertise and

qualifications required to implement SHAER with us. We partnered with Nomaxabiso Fani and Anne Loeffler. The development of a solid partnership with the Raphael Centre was the first step in preparing for and facilitating SHAER in Makhanda. After forming this partnership and before entering the community, we received ethical approval to do so from Rhodes University's Human Research Ethics Committee – Reference: 2020-1116-3436.

The Raphael Centre's social workers recruited women survivors over the age of 18 from networks in which they were already working. Given the aims of SHAER, they invited women who had experienced S/GBV to participate. Prior to participating in any activities, the women engaged in individual interviews with a social worker who shared their language in which they discussed the project in detail (an information sheet was provided to them in English and isiXhosa – the dominant language spoken in the Eastern Cape). After this information was supplied and the women had a chance to ask questions, they were taken through a consent form detailing, among other things, (1) their right to withdraw from the intervention at any time without a reason or penalty, (2) the sharing of their anonymised data with other researchers if requested, and (3) the use of their personal information and how confidentiality would be maintained. Participants were asked if *they* saw any risks associated with their involvement to identify a locally relevant ethics and risk mitigation strategy. Finally, each woman who consented to participate completed the Hopkins Symptom Checklist-25 screening tool. We did not use these to gather data but to identify any symptoms of extreme trauma among potential participants that could require further risk mitigation strategies, referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist, or even exclusion from the intervention. Given the capacity of the Raphael Centre and the nature of the activities, we worked with 12 women.

Once the recruitment process was complete, we began working through the six sessions described above. Given our partners' interest in asset-based community development (ABCD), we decided in dialogue with them to supplement SHAER with two further workshops, during which they focused on ABCD training.

The two unexpected outcomes that I turn to below and based on which I recommend SHAER as a service-learning offering, emanate from our time during the sessions where participants shared stories, and from the debriefing sessions between myself and the social workers who facilitated SHAER with me. I adopt a feminist and critical lens in exploring them, although I found myself drawing from disparate disciplines and traditions of thought when making sense of them.

Two Unexpected Outcomes: Storytelling, Selfhood, and Motherhood

Somewhat surprisingly – given the reason behind their participation and the goals of the intervention – no 'trauma stories' were constructed in SHAER: Makhanda. Neither did participants identify themselves primarily as survivors of S/GBV in the circles. Instead, they focused on their identities as mothers in the community. These two outcomes – the women's focus on forward-looking stories and their emphasis of agential identities – in their case, the identity of mother – were unexpected. I expected (and braced myself for)

trauma stories that produced a narrative understanding of their experience and what David Velleman (2003, 2006) describes as the resolution of an emotional cadence. I expected to see evidence for or against Brison's claim that a survivor needs to tell a narrative to an empathetic audience to (begin to) recover from the intersubjective harm of rape. I had braced myself for this eventuality from the start, which had informed many of my concerns about the ethical robustness of the intervention. Had I thought I would be exploring motherhood and the responsibilities and values associated with it, I would not have felt the need for as many risk mitigation strategies. But what I saw unfold was, in notable ways, contrary to my expectations.

In exploring why no trauma stories were constructed in SHAER: Makhanda, several explanations may be offered – some innocuously stemming from the activities and others, more interestingly, from the perceived interests of stakeholders in the space, including the facilitators and participants. On the more innocuous front, SHAER does not call for participants to speak about their experiences of S/GBV. Moreover, further to stories of experience and memory, SHAER highlights stories of place and people, journeys, and time, and so opens a range of storytelling themes – both backward-looking and forward-looking – for participants to take up.

On the more interesting front, as Brison (2002) reminds us, the interests of one's audience inform the story one tells. Trauma stories may not have been shared because of facilitators' and/or participants' interests as suggested at the time. Perhaps the fact that we did not frame the activities themselves around S/GBV influenced the stories shared by our participants. Relatedly, perhaps the stories told by others and the interests these stories revealed framed later stories told. These possibilities are plausible and could relate to what I explore below. However, I am intrigued by a possibility relating not to the openness of the activities/space or the interests of the participants or facilitators, but to the participants' foregrounding of *particularly agential identities* in their stories.

Hannah Arendt (1998) speaks of the "disclosure of the 'who' through speech" (pp. 183-186) and "the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and generally appearing before an audience of fellow men" (p. 198). For Arendt, we reveal ourselves as subjects through speech, and our stories:

> [T]ell us more about their subjects … than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it… who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero… (Arendt, 1998, p. 183).

In disclosing ourselves to one another through speech – and storytelling – we "fall into an already existing web" (Arendt, 1998, p. 183) of relationships in the public or common world – what Arendt calls "human togetherness" – and it is here that action and speech:

> create a space between the participants … It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me (Arendt, 1998, p. 198 [emphasis mine]).

In telling my story to others, I appear to them *as a subject* and establish the reality of myself and my world. As she puts it,

> *without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt (Arendt, 1998, p. 208).*

Arendt's focus on storytelling as the disclosure and establishment of our identities and world(s) is interesting. If we follow Arendt's suggestions, we could think about our participants as disclosing and establishing their identities and realities through the storytelling activities. Our participants talked about motherhood and raising, caring for, and teaching children in almost all the activities we engaged in. When reflecting, creating stories, or exploring milestones, they told stories about themselves as mothers, their mothers or grandmothers, or their responsibilities and values as mothers in the community. Furthermore, the messages they hoped to share through their stories revolved around their role in educating others, fostering respect, and providing ongoing support to one another. The women's identity as victims or survivors of S/GBV was never foregrounded in their conceptions of themselves or one another. One might think this is of little interest in a setting where violence of this kind is often normalised – again, remember that S/GBV and IPV are frequently deemed legitimate in South Africa to regulate heteronormative social norms. However, I suggest that it is not their silence around their identities as victims or survivors, but, rather, their special, almost exclusive focus on their identities as mothers and on the *agential* roles they highlighted in *forward-looking* stories associated with caring for the community that stand out as most pertinent.

As I turn to making sense of the centrality of motherhood in the women's stories in SHAER: Makhanda, I do so with humility and in full recognition that, as a cultural outsider trained in Western philosophy, I cannot *fully* grasp the meaning of the centrality of this identity to the women who participated in SHAER: Makhanda. I am mindful, for instance, that Simone de Beauvoir – a French existential phenomenologist with significant influence on the trajectory of my feminist thought – considered women to be mired in immanence because of their role in reproducing and rearing children, something that does not resonate with the emphasis placed on the agency entailed by this identity in our participants' stories.

What I do wish to do is bring ideas from diverse traditions of thought – including South(ern) African ideas on motherhood – to bear on it, gesturing to their potential significance. As I do, I also bear in mind the warning issued by Mojubuolu Olufunke Okome (2003). In her words:

> *To avoid overgeneralization and the reification of any given experience, research should focus on the multiplicity of ideas that exist among African women. […] This is a gargantuan task which cannot be undertaken, as has often been done in the past, by studying one group or a fraction thereof and assuming that what is observed applies to all Africans (Okome, 2003, pp. 90-91).*

There are, as Okome puts it, "a multiplicity of ideas" concerning family and motherhood in South(ern) Africa that can be brought to bear upon the centrality of the identity of motherhood in our participants' stories and so, in approaching this centrality, I want to be mindful of this.

Several differences play a role in forming views on motherhood in South Africa. For example, South Africa is constituted of various ethnic groups – including Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Pedi, Tswana, and Ndebele – some are patrilineal (e.g., Xhosa and Zulu cultures) and others matrilineal (e.g., Pedi, Tswana and Ndebele cultures), although most are now, at least contingently, matrifocal. The distinctions here strike me as especially noteworthy in this preamble, given that these are forms of society that emphasise consanguineal over conjugal relations, where the latter is the defining characteristic of typical Western family structures. Again, these distinctions emphasise, I believe, the need to be mindful of one's perspective when interpreting the meaning of motherhood in our participants' stories. (For more on the distinction between conjugal and consanguineal relations, which is relevant to questions of identity, see Nzegwu, 1996). Moreover, although amaXhosa people dominate the Eastern Cape, I do not pretend to know the ethnicity of each of our participants. In addition, these ethnic cultures now exist within a broader hetero-patriarchal culture infused with Western gendered values and norms stemming from earlier forces, including colonialism, Christianity, apartheid, and the anti-apartheid struggle.

Motherhood: A Cherished, Agential Identity

When we consult African and Afrocentric philosophical thought, motherhood appears to hold a salient position in the identities of African women, both in Africa and the diaspora. As "the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women" (Oyewumi, 2000, p. 1096), motherhood, for Oyeronke Oyewumi, among others, is associated with an agential, powerful identity, social position, and role in these traditions. Oyewumi argues that:

> [T]he most important and enduring identity and name that African women claim for themselves is 'mother'. [...] The idea that mothers are powerful is very much a defining characteristic of the institution and its place in society (2000, p. 1097).

In African and Afrocentric thought, mothers are very much a part of and play a significant authorial role in the public sphere and decision-making. In contrast to various Eurocentric versions of motherhood that consign this role and its responsibilities to the realm of 'the private', motherhood in African and Afrocentric thought is strongly associated with public work, roles and responsibilities, and decision-making (Oyewumi, 2000, 2003). The social roles and responsibilities of African motherhood are emphasised in both African feminist philosophy that provides ethnographic accounts of motherhood in traditional (typically West) African communities, as well as in historical, anthropological, and sociological accounts of African motherhood as shaped and practiced in South Africa (Stevenson, 2011).

In these accounts, African mothers are very much part of 'the public' sphere – their role as mothers stretches beyond what Western feminists might consider the private or domestic household to include public decision-making and responsibilities.

Culturally, African mothers exist and function in the public insofar as mothering is seen as collective; as the popular African adage goes: It takes a village to raise a child. Oyewumi (2003) speaks of "multiple" and "non-exclusive mothering" to refer to the collective experience of mothering in many African cultures and communities where mothering is not simply about "childbearing and the mothering of children" but also about "the nurturing of the community" (2003, p. 5). Indeed, what she calls co-mothering, which is not reducible to, but transcends, biological motherhood, founds, for Oyewumi, sisterly relations among African women that are "the essence of community building" (2003, p. 13) and the basis of much political action in Africa.

This picture of motherhood as a collective experience and activity is also reflected in the work of African feminists living and working outside of Africa, who speak about African cultural values pertaining to collective childcare. Abimbola S. Shoboiki (2019), for instance, drawing on both the work of African and African-American feminists – such as Patricia Hill Collins – references mothering collectives and 'othermothers' in her work on her identity formation as an African woman and explicitly links 'other-mothering' and co-mothering networks to social activism. In her words,

> motherhood can provide African women with a base of self-actualisation, status in the African community, and a reason for social activism. [...] Motherhood provides a basis for community othermothers to participate in social activism (Shoboiki, 2019, p. 29 [emphasis added]).

The meaning of the concept 'othermother' is familiar in my context, and yet before I began trying to understand the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, and particularly the special focus that the women in SHAER: Makhanda placed on the identity of motherhood in their stories, I had never encountered a term for it. Indeed, in speaking of the term to one of my Black South African students, he remarked, "Then most of us are raised by 'othermothers'". This term can be found in the work of West African feminists and in African (and other marginalised) women who have moved to unfamiliar places or found themselves navigating foreign countries or cultures (Shoboiki, 2019).

This stronger connection between motherhood and social activism also finds expression in South Africa, where historical accounts exist of self-identifying "mother-activists". For instance, Judith Stevenson (2011), working with Black South African women who were active in the anti-apartheid struggle to document and archive their experiences as mother-activists, reports that in the eyes of these women:

> As in many parts of South Africa, women's activism during this period was, in large part, seen by themselves as entwined with their identities as mothers (Stevenson, 2011, p. 132).

Indeed, in great measure, these women's stories define the 'good mother' at the time as:

[O]ne who was willing to sacrifice herself through political activism to the point of torture, imprisonment, or perhaps even death (Stevenson, 2011, pp. 150–151).

Of course, ideas associated with the 'good mother' at the time, as both Stevenson (2011) and her mother-activists acknowledge, shift based on race, class, and other socially salient identity markers, but for a number of South African mothers at the time, the 'good mother' was an inherently political and socially powerful identity associated with active work outside of the so-called private sphere, driven by the aims of justice and community upliftment (Stevenson, 2011). Here, again, we see the public responsibilities associated with this especially powerful, agential identity in many African cultures.

Far from Beauvoir's (1949) picture of motherhood in *The Second Sex* – in which women are mired in immanence (passivity, or the more object-like [as opposed to subject-like] aspects of the human condition) because of the meaning attached to our reproductive potential – motherhood, here, is aligned with agency and activity in society. Moreover, it is associated with a duty of care for others *and* the community (Oyewumi, 2000, 2003). Given this, while the SHAER: Makhanda women's disinclination to highlight their identities as victims or survivors of S/GBV could be chalked up to simpler reasons – including the open nature of the activities, the perceived interests of the people in the room, or the normative, even legitimised, nature of violence in South Africa – I think there could be something more positive to say. I believe it is possible that we read this silence not as a failure to acknowledge or even as resistance to the identity of victim or survivor of S/GBV, but rather as a refusal grounded in these women's 'cherished' and socially salient identity as African mothers, with all the power and agency this identity entails. As mothers, the participants in SHAER: Makhanda focused on forward-looking stories in which their agency as subjects with roles and responsibilities in shaping the community's future was of primary significance. Two central takeaways that the women were left with were, first, the power of stories and storytelling to teach us how to act and what to value, and, second, their ability as a (mothering) collective to embody and foster particular values in their community through storytelling. For the women, while stories can remind us of people, places, our roots or past, and enable us to reflect on (perhaps traumatic) memories, they do so to help us identify or disclose who we are, what we value, our aspirational norms for future action, and to transfer this knowledge to others.

Returning to Campbell and Mannell's (2016) call for researchers to explore central but perhaps overlooked markers of women's agency that are grounded in "the ways women themselves [make] sense of their lives" (2016, p. 5), the women in SHAER: Makhanda point to a particularly salient marker of agency for women in South(ern) Africa – their status as mothers, othermothers, and mothering collectives – and wanted to deliver the following message: "We want to empower women … We can lift each other up." The identities they highlighted exceed the violence they endured, and challenge dominant social schemes and

scripts of both victims and survivors of S/GBV and of victimisation and its effects. They also challenge my – and perhaps others' – expectations of what the journey of recovery can look like, as well as what an intervention for survivors of S/GBV in South(ern) Africa might entail. Perhaps the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda point us in the direction, to borrow the terms of Ahmad et al. (2022) once again, of further 'landscapes of resistance'.

Part 3: Reimagining SHAER as a Service-Learning Initiative

Work towards institutionalising community engagement in South African HEIs is explicitly encouraged and considered integral to academic and student life. To borrow Gerda Bender's words:

> *Since the publication of White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997), perceptions of community service have changed from a view of community service as one of the three silos of higher education – along with learning/teaching and research – to a view of community service as an integral and necessary part of learning/teaching and research, infusing and enriching the latter two higher education functions with a sense of context, relevance and application (Bender, 2008, p. 83).*

While there has been, and continues to be, debate over how we should understand this imperative (Saidi and Boti, 2023) or, indeed, the nature of community engagement, the scholarship of engagement, or civic engagement (Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011) it is now relatively uncontroversial to believe that HEIs have *a duty* to be responsive to social ills and needs, and to transform not only the students under our care but also the communities within which we are embedded. Over the past three decades, then, we have witnessed the emergence and institutionalisation of community engagement in the academy in the forms of engaged research, such as participatory action research, service-learning, and other student volunteer and work-placement programmes. The call to embed community engagement into our research and teaching and learning practices is resounding at Rhodes University, where our vision and mission include creating locally responsive knowledge, and a number of colleagues have taken up this call for the betterment of our students, research, and community. Indeed, the university is committed, as our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sizwe Mabizela, put it in his inaugural address, to be not only *in* Makhanda but *for* Makhanda (Mabizela, 2015).

In this final part of the paper, in light of the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, I suggest that SHAER can be reimagined from a mental health intervention into a transformative, critical service-learning course (Mitchell, 2008) focused on 'empowerment for participatory democracy.' Perhaps the most important consideration to be reminded of before we move on is that this model does not have to be treated as an intervention for recovery from the trauma resulting from S/GBV – it neither calls for 'trauma stories' to be told nor does it necessitate working with traumatised individuals. In its barest form, SHAER can be seen as a model for critical conscientisation – storytelling for health, expression, and

acknowledgement – a space where, following Arendt (1998), we appear to others as others appear to us.

Service learning is a pedagogical approach that embeds community engagement into the curriculum of a course in a way that is, again, integral to the curriculum (Bender, 2008) – integral, that is, to what is learnt in the course – and not just a 'nice-to-have add-on' (Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011). As has often been said, what students learn in the course informs the service they engage in, and the service they engage in informs what they learn; informs, that is, the learning outcomes of the course. One could argue that service-learning, as an experiential pedagogical approach, responds to John Dewey's (1916) concerns with the dualism or distinction reproduced in education between thought and action, which is arguably reinforced by traditional approaches to teaching and learning. In service learning, the gap between what my colleague, Pedro Tabensky, calls the 'life of the mind' and 'the life of action' is explicitly challenged.

In suggesting that SHAER be reimagined as a *critical* service-learning course, I am guided by Tania Mitchell (2008), who argues that critical service-learning (as opposed to traditional service-learning) is characterised by an *explicit social change orientation*, which she also describes as 'social justice education.' By this, she means that critical service-learning aims to address and contribute to dismantling structures of inequality in communities. In order to accomplish this, those who adopt critical service-learning as a pedagogical approach highlight the redistribution of power in university-community engagements and the development of authentic relationships between university actors – faculty and students – and the community. Developing these relationships and redistributing power, according to Mitchell, requires acknowledging and understanding the various similarities *and* differences among the participants in the engagement as possibilities for connection. Critical service-learning, that is, recognises and works with difference in dialogic engagement or verbal exchange – also described as 'being together', reminiscent of Arendt's 'appearance' in 'human togetherness' – whereby all participants are enabled to develop the awareness necessary for both authenticity and the development of authentic relationships. It is worth quoting Mitchell at some length:

> *A critical service-learning pedagogy asks students to use what is happening in the classroom – the readings, discussion, writing assignments and other activities – to reflect on their service in the context of larger social issues. "Such a vision is compatible with liberatory forms of pedagogy in which a goal of education is to challenge students to become knowledgeable of the social, political, and economic forces that have shaped their lives and the lives of others" (Rhoads, 1998, p. 41) … A critical service-learning pedagogy moves beyond simply doing service in connection to a course's academic content to challenging students to articulate their own visions for a more just society and investigate and contemplate actions that propel society toward those visions. … A critical service-learning pedagogy asks everyone to approach the service-learning relationship with authenticity. In this process, we would develop a shared agenda, acknowledge the power relations implicit in our interactions, and recognize the complexity of identity… (Mitchell, 2008, pp. 55–59).*

These aims are also nicely captured in the phrase 'service for critical consciousness'. Proponents of this approach hope that students come to pay attention to and challenge the root causes of social concerns and, in so doing, develop an 'ethics of care' and become 'agents for change' or active, engaged citizens.

Critical service-learning, as described by Mitchell (2008), aligns well with what John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley (2011) call 'democratic civic engagement', which is framed by an explicit focus on *purpose* – furthering and instilling the values of democracy or what I have called empowerment for participatory democracy – and *process*. Akin to the dialogic exchange described by Mitchell (2008), Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) highlight *reciprocity* among participants of democratic civic engagement – i.e., academics, students, and members of the community. Community engagement that is explicitly democratic focuses, they argue, on preparing students for lives of civic engagement – or education for citizenship – while working *with* (rather than *for*) the community in an inclusive, collaborative, and problem-oriented knowledge co-creation process. As they put it:

> Democratic engagement seeks the public good with the public, and not merely for the public, as a means of facilitating a more active and engaged democracy. … Knowledge generation and discovery is a process of cocreation, breaking down the distinctions between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers. … Democratic engagement locates the university within an ecosystem of knowledge production, requiring interaction with other knowledge producers outside the university for the creation of new problem-solving knowledge through a multidirectional flow of knowledge and expertise. In this paradigm, students learn cooperative and creative problem solving within learning environments in which faculty, students, and individuals from the community work and deliberate together (Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011, pp. 20–21).

This is precisely the kind of service-learning initiative that I believe SHAER has the potential to be reimagined into. As a co-constructed and co-owned space, SHAER redistributes power among participants in the story circle – faculty, students, and members of the community – as everyone deliberates and makes meaning together. Moreover, as shown in all iterations of SHAER, the model fosters self and other awareness – awareness of the forces that have shaped our lives and the lives of others – and the kind of solidarity underpinning the relationships that Mitchell (2008) and Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) describe. Moreover, in both iterations of SHAER in Makhanda, we saw the women 'articulating visions for a more just society' and thinking about how to work together to create the future they envisioned. At the culmination of the intervention, in Session 5, Spreading a Story, our participants wanted to deliver the following messages to their community through their collective stories and storytelling activities:

> Respect starts at home.
>
> Learning starts at home.
>
> Respect is earned with both young and old.

Education is a foundation whereby children and adults learn respect.

<div align="right">

SHAER: Makhanda (1)

</div>

We want to empower women to be able to speak out without being scared.

We want to provide a space where people know that their secrets are safe.

We want to give support to those in need to show them that we stand by them.

We can lift each other up.

<div align="right">

SHAER: Makhanda (2)

</div>

The tone of these messages differs strikingly from that expressed in the participant's quote included earlier: "People are dying in the hands of their partners. Children are dying in the hands of men." These messages are, by contrast, hopeful and, as with any real hope, speak to the role of directed action on the part of the women as agents in realising their hopes for a better future for themselves, their children, and their community.

Indeed, in reading the work of the likes of Mitchell (2008) and Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) on critical service-learning and democratic civic engagement, respectively, I am struck by the ways in which SHAER brings to life the aims of these approaches to democratically framed, community-engaged teaching and learning.

SHAER encourages precisely the kind of 'world'-travelling, to borrow a phrase from Maria Lugones (1987), that underpins the dialogical engagement envisioned by critical service learning scholars and the reciprocity envisioned by practitioners of democratic civic engagement. As seen through previous iterations of SHAER – both the two in Makhanda referenced in this paper and those that took place in Turkey and Afghanistan – SHAER fosters a dialogical space in which those participating in the story circle are able to express their agency, disclose their identity and experiences, and build bonds of solidarity. Further to being the kinds of spaces in which those who have experienced interpersonal violence are able to recover with the help of others (Brison, 2002, Mannell et al., 2018; Ahmad et al., 2022), these are also the kinds of spaces in which communities of inquiry flourish, epistemic agency is fostered and supported, and moral learning takes place (Kelland et al., 2024).

I imagine that SHAER could be reimagined into a number of different service-learning courses. Perhaps most obviously, given its current form and particular aims, in courses in Psychology, Public Health, or Social Work. However, given the aims of democratic community engagement, coupled with the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, I think it could also and, perhaps even more fruitfully, be reimagined into a post-graduate course in applied ethics or women's and gender studies. Any course reimagining SHAER as a service-learning initiative would enable students to develop a reflexive understanding of themselves, others, and their positionality in relation to others, as well as an advanced understanding of community and their role in actively shaping it.

As a service-learning initiative, SHAER has the potential to foster personal transformation for students and community members through deeper ethical and self-awareness, and to advance social justice through feminist, narrative-based, participatory practice "encouraging students to understand and question the social and political factors that cause social problems and to challenge and change them" (Hartley and Saltmarsh, 2011, p. 290). In this initiative, all participants – faculty, students, community partners, and members of the community – would be engaged in a collective storytelling and reflective process that contributes to a decolonial pedagogy of care, recognition, and solidarity. As a service-learning initiative, SHAER could also invite institutions to rethink their metrics of success in engagement: from impact in terms of research outputs to relationships of solidarity and community-university mobilisation.

Notes on Contributor

Lindsay Kelland
Rhodes University
l.kelland@ru.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9945-6734

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