Students' Food Acquisition Struggles in the Context of South Africa:
The Fundamentals of Student Development

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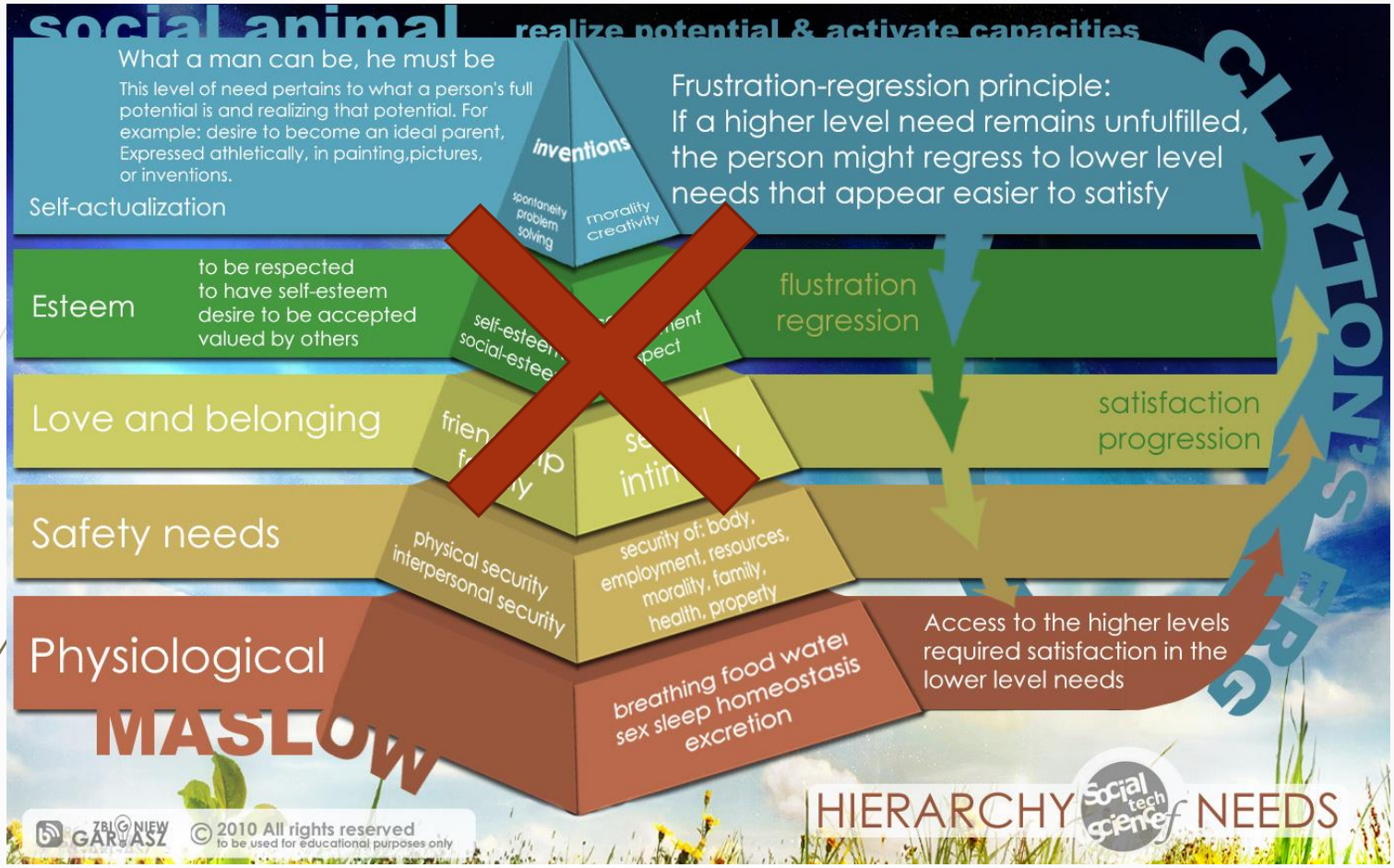
South Africa:

- one of the **wealthiest** countries in Africa
- among the **most unequal** countries in the world
- with severe **discrepancies between the rich and poor**
- since the **end of apartheid** the conditions of the **poorest 50%** of the population have **failed to improve**

(Bhorat, van der Westhuizen, & Jacobs, 2009; May, 1998; Nattrass & Seekings, 2001; Sanders & Chopra, 2006, Robins, 2005).



"if all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then **dominated by the physiological needs**, all **other needs** may become simply **non-existent** or be **pushed into the background**" (Maslow, 1989, p. 21)

https://hanescoaching.wordpress.com/2012/08/14/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs/

Studies among SA students:

Impoverished university students experience **hopelessness, internalized oppression**, and **shame**

utilise strategies to **conceal their poverty**

Study by Siyakhana among Wits students found:
Students most vulnerable to hunger:
lived off campus and were **on financial aid**
They were **embarrassed** about their situation and would not easily admit to experiencing hunger.

Letseka and Breier's (2008), Maile, 2008; Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010, Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010

Food Talk: A Window into Inequality among University Students

Dominguez-Whitehead & Kevin Whitehead

Struggling students:
"In order to make their funds stretch, students **purchase less expensive items** such as bread,"

"**Inequalities between students are reflected and reproduced in their food-related troubles talk":**

> **Wealthier students** talk about eating too much and wanting to keep their weight down,
> **Poorer students** talk about "depleting their funds before the end of a term and not being able to purchase healthy food, such as fruit or vegetables,"

Mental stressors of studies and responsibilities
combined with
lack of material resources

Drop out

Approximately **70 %** of the families of drop-outs are classified as having **low economic status**:

Mostly students from **African families** earning **meagre wages:** some as little as R1 600/month

Letseka and Breier's (2008), Maile, 2008; Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010, Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010

The Focus of this study:

Student-centered analysis:

- What are some of their **pressing concerns** with respect to food issues?
- What are their **experiences** in relation to **food acquisition** and **consumption**?
- And, to what extent is **food affordable** and **available** on campus?

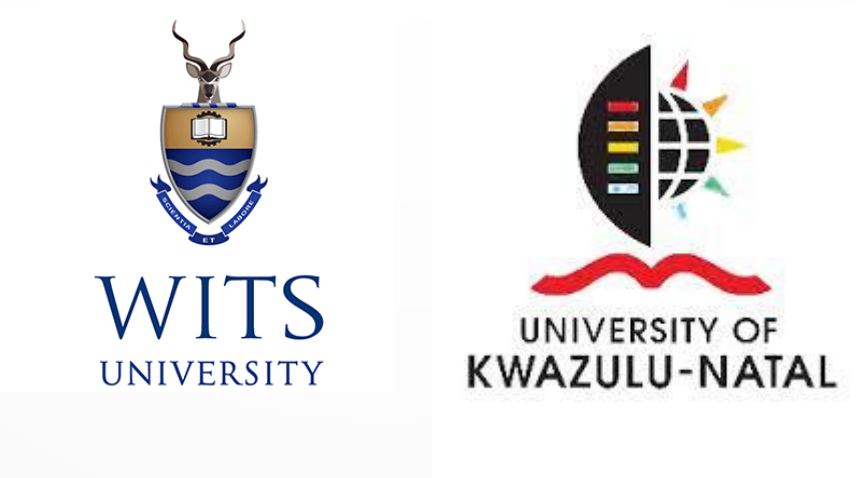
Methods

Qualitative, case study design

- Part of a larger study

Selected case studies:

- **WITS -** historic university with an enduring legacy
- **UKZN -** newly formed promising university



(Guba & Lincoln, 1994)

15 student focus groups : 10 at Wits; 5 at UKZN

Open-ended, non-invasive questions:

- favourite things about being university students
- strengths of the university
- challenges and difficulties experienced
- what could be done to improve their lives as students
- what kinds of events/incidents had been particularly important for them during their time as university students
- how their background and life experiences had impacted their university experience

Without students being specifically questioned about them:

Food acquisition and **consumption** emerged as significant → **points to food as a critical area of concern for students**

focus group interviews allow "research participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299)

2 student affairs officials

one from each university

- **purposively selected** based on them heading one of the multiple student affairs offices at their university

- based on them having **extensive experience** serving students' needs

- Participated in **individual interviews** (1 hour)
  - focused on the duties they perform,
  - the types of students they serve,
  - the challenges that they witness students experience

The data corpus :

>14 hours of student video recordings

>2 hours of audio recordings with student affairs officials

transcribed and **analysed**

assessment and systematic examination of the data

Themes constructed

Results & Discussion

Three overarching food themes emerged:

Depletion of food funds

Excerpt 1
UKZN 8-15-08

P4: "*There's this thing called financial aid, right? It's like, it's sponsoring us as a student...The money (.) I I don't know how to to put it but to me. I find it like it it's not enough. In meal allowance it's not enough (.) to me cause sometimes eh, eh, eh ((chuckles)) when there was this res I use to stay at, at Malherbe you know? Some eh, during those [days]*"
P3: *[Ey]*
P4: "*Sometimes ja, we like, we go like to sleep without chowing, without getting a food cause we've run out of money from like he said ((points to P1)) the background is not ok. Our parents doesn't have money. They don't have the money.*"

Depletion of food funds

- Parents and family cannot support food needs
- Get a food allowance and aid, but its not enough

- Often have to go to bed without food
  (Note: hesitation and discomfort to disclose this information)

Depletion of food funds

Excerpt 2
UKZN 8-18-08

P3: *And (.) at that time you don't have <u>any kind of money</u> .hh*
((P3 laughs))
((group laughs))
P3: *You're broke. You <u>don't have any food</u>. 15*

P7: *And something, sometimes, people sometimes s-steal .*
P4: *Ja, too much.*
((group laughs)).
P7: *In res, ah, in res you put your <u>food</u> in the fridge and <u>sometimes it gets stolen</u>.*

Depletion of food funds

- Towards end of term: no money left for necessities
- No money for food
  (Note: problematic as this is exam time)

- Often others steal your food in the res
  (Points toward desperation surrounding food scarcity)

Associations were **not** made between a **lack of funds** and struggles to acquire books, miscellaneous academic supplies, or entertainment

Associations were made between **a lack of funds** and **a struggle for food**

Acquiring food on campus

Excerpt 3
Wits 9-2-11

P1: *Ay the shops are expensive"*
P3: *Ja*
P2: *( )*
P4: *Very, (everything) is expensive*
P2: *You'd rather go to Pick n Pay*
P1: *A simple banana is like five rand. ((group laughs))*
P1: *One banana, five rand. ((group laughs))*
P1: *[It's too expensive.*
P4: *( )*
P3: *So you'd rather just go outside*

Acquiring food on campus

(Note: Some of the women in this group reported living in off-campus accommodation and others reported living in non-catering university residence halls)

These participants suggest that **due to the high cost of food** on campus they opt to **leave the campus to acquire food**

In particular, they complain about **the high cost of fruit**.

Acquiring food on campus

Excerpt 4
Wits 7-27-11

P: *So (1.3) I eat good food. Like the food is great…Breakfast, lunch, and supper and th-they have all variety of things. Like if I don't want to eat fast food and chips I can go to the cooked food.*
R: *Mm.*
P: *You know I can go to eat some pap, like if I let's say I, aah, I miss my mom so I go for pap. My mom loves pap so I go for pap. But now, if I'm, if I'm in a hurry I take a pack. You know I just go there, five seconds I'm out. You know?*
R: *So the pack has like, what is, what is inside?*
P: *Oh, the pack it's like (.) you have (.) different options. You can have a pack with some sandwich and some cold drinks, some Simbas and chocolate. You can have a pack with some pie and juice. It's a variety of stuff, ja.*

Acquiring food on campus

The participant in this excerpt reports that the food available to him at his **residence hall** is "great"

He has a **variety of options** at his disposal
He thus **indicates that he can make choices** about the kind of food he consumes and that **food is available** to him even **when he is "in a hurry**"

(Noteworthy: he **does not mention money** as a **resource** / **obstacle** to attaining this food.
This is perhaps attributed to the **food being available at the residence hall** where he is housed
Note: majority of students live off campus however…

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Student involvement:

"*devot[ing] considerable energy to **studying**, spend[ing] much **time on campus**, **participat[ing]** actively in **student organizations**, and **interact[ing]** frequently with **faculty** members and **other students***"

Contributes to academic and social development

Eating facilities are noted as one of the key factors:
Communal eating = social glue

Astin, 1999, p. 518

Catered food facilities?

Access

Variety

Convenience

University students may not necessarily have the time or tools to shop for food and prepare their own meals

Within the past two decades many South African universities **have moved away from the catering model** to purportedly make university education more affordable

Has university been made more affordable at the expense of university students going without food?

Awareness of others' food struggles

Excerpt 5
Wits 9-2-11

P3: *So (.) it's hard for some people cause you-*
P2: *Ja, cause there's [people (here who like) can't eat. [(We were discussing it in class today)*
P3: *Ja. That's-*
P2: *There's people who actually have no meal. They can only afford to just be here, (and) pay rent*
P3: *Ja.*
P2: *and that's it. They go for days, they (they can't afford to pay for their*
P1: *(Others think they) just cook pap. Eat it in the morning and then settle (for it) all day.*
P2: *((Nods)) (I think[ )*
P4: *[But I think that Wits is wasting a lot of money on entertainment.*
P2: *Ja. ((laughs))*
P1: *((laughs))*
P4: *Cause it's like (freshers) party, all res picnic, Engineer breakfast whatever.*

Awareness of others' food struggles

- Some people at the **university have often have no food** and **go without** meals **for days**
- **Survive on pap in the morning**, and suggests that they eat **nothing else all day**

- Implies that the **university does not act responsibly**
- Alludes to the university having resources to assist needy students, but not **taking adequate steps** to do so.

Awareness of others' food struggles

Excerpt 6
Wits 8-20-08

P2: *Um, (.) for the course, and then you get charged for n- course notes. You get charged about I don't know three hundred, two hundred rand (.) a semester for course notes (.) And I dunno- someti[mes] I don't know (.) where that*
P5: *[Ja.]*
P2 *: [money goes because]*
P1*: [Ja, we don't get any] [of that.]*
P5*: [We don]'t get any.*
P2*: We don't- you don't see that money. (0.4) They put up slides and you copy down or whatever, but you still get charged for [those no]tes.*
P1*: [It's like] score a extra two hundred rand from [all] the [people at vars]ity and*
P2*: [Mm.] [Each student.]And I mean uh- n- uh- [we're um]*
P1*: [For each course.] (0.6)*
P2*: .hh We're sort of (.) lucky enough that it doesn't make t- I mean a huge difference in our life, but <u>some of the students</u> there are- like two hundred rand is <u>the difference between eating and not eating that month</u>.*

Awareness of others' food struggles

- P2 displays **ownership of the group's food privileges**. She notes that they are fortunate enough that the cost of course notes does not make "a huge difference in" in their lives.
- Speaks not od a particular student going without food, but **about a group of people that share a similar experience**.
- This **possibly signals** that **food acquisition among students is a known about problem** that is not attributed to the specific circumstances of a singled-out student, but is perhaps instead **a systemic problem in need of being addressed.**

Student affairs officials

Also **aware of the food struggles** experienced by students who had **very few resources** at their disposal.
Reported **bearing the burden** of **helping students** with **few institutional resources** at their disposal.

One of the student affairs officials noted that there are *"insufficient systems in place to deal with very real and disconcerting problems."*

Recommendations

Student affairs professionals should be **activists** that **champion students' most basic needs**, particularly those directly related to food acquisition and consumption

Care must be taken that these endeavors are:

- **sustainable,**
- **formal,**
- **institutionalised,** and
- that they take into consideration **human dignity**

Efforts with a focus on **charity, donations**, and **unreliable funding**:

- helpful in the **short-run**
- likely place **high demands** on a relatively few staff members,
- be **unsustainable**, and
- be **potentially damaging** for students

NSFAS
NATIONAL STUDENT FINANCIAL AID SCHEME

Careful reassessment based on realistic cost of living

Although insufficient funding and scarce resources have been the mantra of the higher education system in South Africa

If the system is experiencing dire inefficiencies
Which may contribute to the devastating drop-out rate
(50% in SA)

It **translates to a massive waste of national resources**

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THANK YOU