

The MoreThan#MeerAs Project as a Strategy to Create Safe Healing Spaces for a Marginalised Community

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Abstract

Marginalised communities in South Africa continue to face layered psychosocial challenges rooted in historical trauma and systemic inequalities. These intersecting hardships have profound implications for individual and collective well-being. Touws River, a small rural town in the Western Cape, exemplifies these dynamics, with high unemployment and social fragmentation following the collapse of its railway-based economy. paper aimed to explore how a community innovation project could serve as a strategy to create opportunities for participants to experience and develop a sense of community and unity by teaching participants that they are MoreThan#MeerAs their past and their self-perceived inadequacies. This qualitative study involved twenty-three participants. Data were collected using semi-structured focus group discussions. The findings suggest that the MoreThan#MeerAs project created a safe space for participants to share their experiences, feel heard, and be seen as a group. They expressed feeling unconditional acceptance for who they are and



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where they are. The MoreThan#MeerAs project guided, supported, and enabled participants to experience growth in themselves and each other as a team. The project changed the way participants perceive themselves and their community. This study demonstrates the potential for safe spaces to challenge perceptions about self, others, and their community, and act on new possibilities.

Keywords: Community innovation project; community health and well-being; healing; Touws River; MoreThan#MeerAs Project

Background

Marginalised communities continue to face layered hardships rooted in systemic inequality, historical trauma, and limited access to psychosocial support services (Ferreira, Salvucci and Tarp 2022). These intersecting hardships are not only structural but deeply embedded in the sociopolitical histories of colonisation, racial segregation, economic exclusion, and cultural erasure (Van Staden 2024). In South Africa, these intersecting hardships are deeply rooted in the legacy of apartheid, and they are currently manifested through continuous economic exclusion, disrupting the cohesion and resilience of communities (Lediga et al. 2025). In marginalised communities, exclusion remains widespread and deeply entrenched, with many individuals unable to afford services due to geographic isolation, poverty, and infrastructural limitations. The mental health of individuals is therefore shaped by the social, physical, and economic conditions in which they are born, grow up, and work (Macintyre et al. 2018).

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which an individual realises their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community (WHO 2021). However, a report by the Sapien Labs (2022) ranks South Africa among the countries with the poorest mental health outcomes. Craig et al. (2022) found that more than half of South African adults have been exposed to adverse life experiences, that negatively affect their mental health and overall well-being. Furthermore, Cooper and Stewart (2017) highlight that those born in poverty and deprivation face higher risk of mental health.

Touws River, a small rural town situated within the Breede Valley Local Municipality in the Western Cape in South Africa is an example of a marginalised community within the South African context. Touws River was established due to the development of the Cape Government Railways line connecting Cape Town and the newly discovered diamond fields in Kimberley, in 1875, and also connecting to Johannesburg. The railway line was central to the town's economy and the community experienced great prosperity from the early years until the early 1980s (Lediga et al. 2025). Given the extent of economic stimulus that was generated at the time, the local population remained, mostly, dependent on that single industry. However, the gradual decline in the extent of railway activity in the late 1980s, the cost of the upkeep of the railway yard, and the ultimate closure of the railway station led to the collapse of the town's

economy. Today, like most single-industry towns, Touws River has negative socio-economic impacts, including high levels of poverty. The community of Touws River has been struggling to revive its economy with very limited resources. An estimated 85% of people who live in the town today do not earn an income (Investec Online 2023). The aim of this paper is to describe how the community innovation project was used as a strategy to create safe healing spaces where participants experience and learn that they are more than their past, illness, fears, thought patterns, abilities, or disabilities.

The MoreThan#MeerAs Project

The MoreThan#MeerAs project was established as a collaborative effort in 2021 by the Breede Valley Association of and for Persons with Disabilities (BVAPD), the DG Murray Trust, and MoreThanMeerAs (a Non-Profit Organisation [NPC]). Details regarding this collaboration can be found in Lediga et al. (2025), that explored the participants' perceived value of the Touws River MoreThan#MeerAs project. The MoreThan#MeerAs project was piloted during 2022–2024 and consisted of two phases.

Phase 1 was a five-day face-to-face MoreThan#MeerAs interactive group process that was designed for group members to get to know each other, build relationships through dialogue, and deepen cohesion. The groups formed a common identity by selecting a group name, motto, and logo. The groups were:

- Group 1 - To Be;
- Group 2 - New Beginnings;
- Group 3 - Saam Staen (Stand Together); and
- Group 4 - Dream Machine.

Each group participant actively reflected on their story as an individual living in Touws River, and also on the collective story of Touws River as a local community.

Phase 2 was a creative component facilitated over three months. Groups 1 and 2, in the creative phase, focused on income generation and restoration of the old station building, respectively. The aim of restoring the station building was to bring the community together in a clean-up project and even re-use the building as a venue for a community market. Groups 3 and 4 identified projects to create a community built on care and trust, and bring about the Touws River they “dream about”. Groups were encouraged to reconstruct the story of their community and explore what they would want from a new community.

The MoreThan#MeerAs process is guided by the principles of group therapy and more specifically the Interactive Group Model (Yalom and Leszcz 2020). One of the principles most fundamental to group therapy is that an individual is affected by the system in which he or she functions (Brabender, Fallon and Smoler 2004). Group therapy is based on the psycho-social interactive approach (Mathias et al. 2023) and is

dependent on meaningful encounters and engagements with others within healthy relationships (Brebender, Fallon and Smoler 2021). According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), there is no human deed or thought that lies fully outside the experience of other people. Many individuals suffer from their issues in silence, feeling alone, afraid, and ashamed. When group members are accepted by other members, despite their supposed weaknesses, feelings of shame and isolation begin to fall away. Additionally, recognising that human experience and emotion are universal can foster a sense of connection, bonding to oneself, others, the phenomenal world, and ultimately, meaning, which in turn can lead to healing (Mount 2007).

Methods

Study Design

This paper is part of a larger qualitative study exploring the value of the involvement of the MoreThan#MeerAs NPO in Touws River, Western Cape, as perceived by participants and group facilitators. For this reason, a qualitative study was conducted to explore, in-depth, the stories of the project participants.

Population

A total of twenty-three participants took part in the Touws River MoreThan#MeerAs project during 2022–2024. The participants consisted of both men and women ranging from twenty to sixty-seven years of age. The four MoreThan#MeerAs project group facilitators who were part of participant recruitment, Phase 1 and Phase 2, of the project were included in the study population.

A total of five focus groups were formed as part of the data collection process. Four of the focus groups were representative of the four MoreThan#MeerAs project groups that were involved during 2022–2024, namely: Group 1 - To Be; Group 2 - New Beginnings; Group 3 - Saam Staans (Stand Together), and Group 4 - Dream Machine. A fifth focus group discussion was held with the four facilitators of the MoreThan#MeerAs project. A total of twenty-three participants took part in focus group interviews.

Focus group semi-structured interviews were conducted once written informed consent had been obtained from all willing research participants. All interviews were conducted in Afrikaans by an external research assistant, Mia Duvenage, who had not been involved with the Touws River community or involved in the MoreThan#MeerAs project.

The focus groups were interviewed in the same groups that the MoreThan#MeerAs participants completed their three-month process in line to explore group cohesion as part of the social cohesion process. The interviews were all held in the same venue, the hall at Steenvliet Public Library. Photographs were taken of the creative works, during

the creative process of the MoreThan#MeerAs events, were used to stimulate reflection and discussion about the group's experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted individually by members of the research team, Andri Eloff (AE), Louine Griessel (LG), Manoko Lediga (ML), and Jana Muller (JM), to identify initial codes and categories. Once a final code list was agreed upon, JM and ML conducted an in-depth inductive analysis. A set of themes and data was agreed upon and shared with the rest of the research team. A list of draft findings was shared with the participants to give their input and to provide feedback. Three participants contributed to the critical reflection and input into this paper and are included as co-authors. See details of the ethical implications below. This process of including participants as co-authors allowed the researchers to reflect on their biases and assumptions and work in collaboration with the participants to best represent their perceptions (Korstjens and Moser 2018).

Ethics

All the study respondents were verbally informed of the aim of the study and were provided with informed consent forms in their language of choice, which was also explained to them by MD, the external research assistant who conducted the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured by MD and they were then transcribed and anonymised by an external professional before data analysis. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym by the transcriber, which was used during the data analysis and write-up of the research. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. During the write-up of this paper, the potential risk of co-author participants being identified by the data was explained and a different consent form was signed by these co-authors as part of the informed consent process. Ethics approval was granted by the Stellenbosch University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (REC: SBE-2022-24623, 23 June 2022).

Positionality

According to Holmes (2020), positionality is normally identified by locating the researcher in three areas, namely: (i) the subject under investigation, (ii) the research participants, and (iii) the research context and process. LF and AE, as facilitators, were directly involved with the participants from the MoreThan#MeerAs project and shared intimate knowledge of the participants, the environment, and the MoreThan#MeerAs project programme outcomes and aims. This enabled a richer understanding of the context of the participants' experiences during the data analysis and writing up of this article. LG has been involved with the Touws River community for more than thirteen years during her work at BVAPD, which assisted the research participants in exploring the history of social development in the community.

Findings

There were six overarching themes related to the aim of this research paper: finding oneself, sharing pain, becoming a family, being motivated to change, embarking on the change, and the process. Under the process theme, three sub-themes were extracted: expectations, recruitment, and timing.

Participants discussed the impact of the MoreThan#MeerAs project on their personal lives. Through connection, they realised that they were worthy of healing and belonging. Joy [Group 4] reflected that it is important to start with oneself, through a process of introspection, which was mentioned by many participants as being a catalyst for realising who they were and how far they had already come.

We have to start with ourselves—I learned to be myself, I have more self-respect—I actually came to get more respect for myself ... now I'm standing up for myself. If you said anything about me then I will explain to you, you did not walk the path I walked so you can't decide for me.

Judy [Group 2] felt the same:

... in the end that was the highlight for me. And at the end of the day, when I was able to find myself, I cried so much because then I saw that I had already come through most of the things.

In the process of introspection and recognising the power they had to accept or change their perceptions of themselves, they experienced healing.

Participants reported experiencing growth in confidence, in themselves, and each other as a team, as Amy [Group 1] makes clear:

MoreThan came to show us how to become whole from within.

Asnath [Group 1] reflected that the process was not easy, but necessary to live a life with hope:

What we learned here at MoreThan was an eye-opener for me, helped me to heal from the inside ... You can look beyond your circumstances and dream. What is life without dreams?

Meridene [Group 4] aptly captured what the participants expressed during their participation in the project:

I laughed, I cried, I did. I actually came to find myself at MoreThan.

This is echoed by Loti's [Group 4] experience of recognising that she is her own person and not an extension of her husband, a public figure in the community:

MoreThan really changed my life in a way that I never realised. From that week onwards, I could feel like I'm alive. I felt like I was alive for the first time... I'm not just [my husband's] wife; I'm a human being in my own capacity. I have my own abilities, I have my own stuff, and I could take every opportunity I got, every stage I got, I could own it ...

Sharing Pain

Participants reflected on being a citizen of Touws River and the value of being part of the MoreThan#MeerAs project. They perceive being part of a group as being inspirational and something to look forward to. In particular, participants referred to the group as a place where they could share their experiences of pain and suffering and obtain support and strength from each other.

The experience of an authentic encounter, which seems to be facilitated in a context of acceptance and vulnerability, allowed a cyclical process of self-reflection to occur.

Betty [Group 4] reflects the heaviness of life and the pain that she experienced, but that this pain is somehow shared by other participants:

Sometimes you get up in the morning with a heavy mind. But when you get here then you feel fresh. You feel lucky. Because my pain is Ounie's pain, Ounie's pain is Sarie's pain. We don't see it, we sense it. And that made us a team.

Asnath [Group 1] echoes Betty's sentiment about hurt and "sores", and how this is a shared experience:

Everyone has a hurt. We all have a hurt, massive hurts. Big sores. But MoreThan came to show us how to become whole from within ...

Loti [Group 4] also reflected on the importance of recognising that she was not alone and that other people in the same community could relate to her hurts and, in addition, were not necessarily out to hurt her:

I'm not alone in that: others have gone through the same. We sometimes share the same pain in a community, but we don't know that about each other. It was fun, it was nice to be able to trust and to learn. I can trust the group and I can trust other people out there. It's not everyone who always wants to hurt you.

This important realisation was echoed by Claire [Group 4]:

... I'll be able to walk a path with them again. I they made me feel special.

Participants reflected on the impact of sharing their struggles and woundedness. They shared their pain and life stories in the group. Some participated with caution but the overwhelming experience across the groups was of relief, freedom, and feeling whole

again. It was possible to create a healing space within the safety of the quality connection created by the participants in the groups.

Initially, on joining the groups, some of the participants who, after all, lived in the same town, nevertheless felt alone and isolated, as Asnath [Group 1] makes clear:

We are from Touws River, but we did not know each other. It's a small place, but really [we] didn't know each other; it's good to know how other people live.

In some cases, as evidenced by the earlier quote of Loti's that people were not necessarily out to hurt her, there was an element of caution and reservation when joining the MoreThan#MeerAs project groups. Amy [Group 1] reflects on how these feelings dissipated during the process of the project, which enabled connection:

I also felt a bit isolated in my heart at the beginning, almost like someone who is withdrawn, but became very close to each other and they made me feel much better.

Larissa [Group 2] alludes to the value of participation and connection leading to the formation of what she referred to as a family:

And we took each other by the hand. We started as a small family, and we gained trust. We cried; we laughed. It was fun working with the other teammates that were there.

Motivated to Change

Amy [Group 1] reflected on learning the value of intentionally motivating oneself to initiate change and the rekindling of a new sense of purpose and drive, while at the same time recognising that she and the others did not have to do it alone:

What I learned from MoreThan [is] if you don't motivate yourself and encourage yourself to get to the top then you're just going to stay down ... I feel much better really, and I feel I can and I will do better in the future.

The sense of relief of not having to face the journey alone was a common theme amongst participants, especially as it related to making a change within their local community. Asnath [Group 1] stated:

... but if we walk together, maybe one, two, three, then we will make a difference.

Recognising the immense challenges the community was up against, the participants believed they had the power, as a team, to tackle some of these challenges, as evidenced by what Denise [Group 3] had to say:

Under the circumstances, as has been said, unemployment, drugs, vandalism, but we can ... we can make him [Touws River] right. We can make him better, because of MoreThan—what you learned from MoreThan: you can restore Touws River.

The motivation and drive Denise alludes to above is echoed by Carly [Group 3], who reported that the group's desire to make an impact extended beyond the conclusion of the MoreThan#MeerAs project:

MoreThan came to teach me a lot of stuff and, and, opened my eyes. What can I do for Touws River, as [part of] a group standing together? I said the other day when we were sitting there at my house and having such a good time eating and saying goodbye to each other [after the conclusion of the MoreThan project], that we need to get on with the project. We can't stop here. We have to show Touws River. We can make our town a better place, never mind the drugs, never mind what. We can work for Touws River.

The potential of participation in the MoreThan#MeerAs project having an overflow effect on the community and other people's lives was mentioned by Melody [Group 4]:

With pride, yes, let me say so, speaking of MoreThan and stuff, it's affected a lot of people's lives. For real.

Embarking on Change

The participants from groups 3 and 4, who specifically focused on community service projects, explained that they, through their actions as part of the MoreThan#MeerAs project creative phase, liked knitting blankets for the elderly. They felt a sense of achievement and the desire to be part of something. It influenced the people in their home environment and community. The pride in the realisation that they too had something to offer their community was evident. Claire [Group 4] described an encounter with her granddaughter with regards to the knitting project:

For example, my granddaughter at school asks me, 'Grandma, whose pants are these? Whose knitwear is this? Teach me to knit too.'

'MoreThan, the programme, taught me.'

'Who's MoreThan?'

'That's the course where I was and stuff,' I'm explaining to her now.

'Now can't I go? Can I?'

I say, 'No, you're a kid. You have to walk to school. It's not for you now.'

'Oh, now I can't knit?'

I said, 'I'm going to be able to teach you how to knit.'

And then I got to my friend, and she just said, 'No, let me knit too ...'

Claire's feeling that she could contribute to the development of her granddaughter and friends goes alongside Denise's [Group 3] experience of the feeling of being of value to others, especially when it relates to the upliftment of their community.

It was good for me, It was a random act of kindness when we went and handed out those blankets ... It doesn't have to be big that you give of yourself—just that little bit you give of yourself carries so much value for someone else or attaches importance to someone else's life. And a simple blanket that we crocheted meant so much; it was so important to someone else's life.

She goes on to reflect on the importance of the ability to give to others contributing to her sense of self-worth:

We shouldn't consider ourselves little-minded. We are important. That's what I learned, I'm important ...

There was a general reflection on the importance of other members of the community having a chance to join the MoreThan#MeerAs project, because of the change of perspective it offered the participants, as seen here, in Melody's [Group 4] words:

You see things, and the outlook of the world changes, and you look at it differently. But, as I say, people do not know what's waiting for them. They just have to join. The course teaches you a new outlook on life. That which you didn't know, you ... you don't know yourself either ... You're more than that. Really, I highly advise people to come to MoreThan.

The Process and Expectations

All in all, there was a great deal of positive feedback about the influence MoreThan#MeerAs had on people's lives and the community, as Claire [Group 4] states:

MoreThan came to teach me to be myself. I'll do it again. If I have the opportunity again, I'll do it again because it's life-changing.

There was, however, a concern that the communities' expectations of reward or remuneration may hamper their willingness to participate.

So, one of the main obstacles to the sustainability of the MoreThan#MeerAs project mentioned was social security grants. Asnath [Group 1] mentioned that people, especially the youth, lost their drive and motivation unless an opportunity that was offered included an incentive:

Yes, it's hard to get people because ... the people were slow, they would rather sit at home all day than come to see, unless a "yellow carrot" beckoned to them. You see, that's the mentality of our community.

It can therefore be seen that participants identified a lack of motivation and drive that existed without the community knowing ahead of time what the value would be to them.

Group facilitator B described how word of mouth from previous participants appeared to be the most effective way of recruiting participants for the subsequent groups that were run at Touws River:

... we actually found that people came there by word of mouth. Judy went and [told people], 'You have to go; it's amazing.' And a whole bunch of people [went].

Although group participants encouraged other community members to attend the MoreThan#MeerAs project groups, it was evident that a more diverse representation of the Touws River community was lacking, as group facilitator A makes clear.

I think one of our, uh, points were social cohesion. So, we didn't get diverse participants to address it because we couldn't get them there even though we invited them a lot [40:00]. So, we got actually a half a [unclear] cut of Touws River's society.

Timing

A challenge to the MoreThan#MeerAs project process was finding the time for group meetings between social grant weeks—mostly the first week of the month. Social grants are grants paid by the South African Social Security Agency, that is: the disability grant; grant for older persons and war veteran's grant; foster child grant; care dependency grant, and child support grant. Another challenge was finding time for group meetings during grape harvest season. Group meetings were set outside of the season to allow full attendance and recruitment of participants. Group facilitator C stated:

The other thing was also the time of year and the time of the groups, we only learned later: don't do it in the first week of the month [group laughs]. Stay away from the grant week!

Meridene [Group 4] also emphasised the importance of timing:

If they're going to do it again they just have to keep it again in the winter because we're going back to [the] vineyards now. So, it's going to be a little awkward now.

Discussion

The findings show that the MoreThan#MeerAs project did more than facilitate therapeutic engagement—it catalysed a process of relational healing and identity reconstruction within Touws River. By creating a space where participants could share their experiences, feel heard, and be seen, the project addressed core elements of trauma-informed care: safety, trustworthiness, peer support, and empowerment (Chirica 2025). The way participants were accepted without judgment helped break the cycle of shame and feeling invisible. It gave them the chance to feel confident and respected in a place

where they hadn't always felt that way before. This transformation is not merely emotional but also structural because when people begin to perceive themselves and their community differently, they also begin to act differently. By acting differently, new relationships are formed and peer-led activities are initiated as observed.

Meaningful participations were repeatedly emphasised. Participants described how being actively involved—rather than passively observed—allowed them to feel valued, respected, and heard. Participation was not limited to attending sessions; it involved co-creating activities, sharing personal stories, making decisions, and supporting one another in a safe and inclusive space. Furthermore, the MoreThan#MeerAs project's emphasis on team-based growth and mutual support resonates with communal resilience theory, which posits that healing is most sustainable when rooted in collective action and shared narratives (Saul 2022).

Maté and Maté (2022: 422) suggest that “healing cannot occur if a person does not accept their worthiness to heal”. True, authentic encounters and connections with another person or other people have the potential to bring healing and be transformational. The study findings also highlight the importance of support. Family or friends, communities, and structure have therefore been identified as some of the important facilitators for change. Sharing and listening to stories are, therefore, a major component of change and healing. Families and community members must be able to share their experiences of trauma and survival.

Moreover, the emotional outpouring and spontaneous sharing of painful past and present stories suggest that the safe space created by the group allowed participants to feel heard and be seen. They experienced unconditional acceptance for who they are and where they are. They felt worthy and worthy to heal. Realising that their current behaviour and mindset are contributing to the existing way of being in Touws River. That moment of realisation brought about deep sadness, and an awareness that the future of Touws River is truly in their hands. The MoreThan#MeerAs initiative therefore exemplified the power of community innovation—where local voices, lived experiences, and cultural knowledge are not only acknowledged but actively shape the design and delivery of interventions (Dyll and Tomaselli 2024). In this light, the project becomes more than a healing intervention but a site of justice, belonging, and possibility. It demonstrated that when marginalised individuals are given space to be more than their past, illness, or perceived limitations, they do not simply heal—they lead.

Limitations

A limitation of the study may be that some participants may not have attended all contact and follow-up sessions, which might have affected their responses and interaction with the group and interviewer. This research is limited to one community in rural South Africa; the aim is not to generalise to other contexts. Excluding participants who

attended less than three sessions in the first week limits us in our understanding of the reasons why participants in the project may have missed sessions.

Having the qualitative data translated by someone who was not directly involved in the interviews may have reduced the interpretive depth, as subtle cues, emotional inflections, and context-specific meanings could have been lost in translation. This may have constrained the researchers' ability to fully grasp the participants' intended meanings during analysis. The study also acknowledges the lack of input from MoreThan#MeerAs participants who did not attend enough sessions to qualify for inclusion.

Their perspectives could have offered valuable insights into their experiences with the project and their views on Touws River and its future development.

Conclusion

The MoreThan#MeerAs project guided, supported, and enabled participants to experience growth in themselves and each other as a team. The project influenced how participants view themselves and their community. This research adds to the existing body of knowledge on mental well-being and social cohesion within rural South African contexts. It highlights the value of safe spaces in reshaping individual and collective perceptions, fostering reflection, and encouraging action toward new opportunities.

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