

# GRAPPLING WITH EMERGING ADULTHOODS: YOUTH NARRATIVES OF COMING OF AGE IN A FRONTIER TOWN, ZIMBABWE

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## ABSTRACT

This study is about subjectivities of young people and about coming of age in a frontier town, Beitbridge, in southern Zimbabwe. The study is motivated by the growing attention to African youth as a social-demographic group and a social phenomenon since the late 1990s in the context of unprecedented economic dislocation. The latter has seen young people resorting to livelihoods largely seen as illicit, immoral and anti-establishment such as activities in the grey economy and sex work. As young people take matters into their own hands, policy makers have tended to use essentialist arguments according to which young people's behaviour can be understood as a result of age and hormonal changes. This study uses a constructivist and interpretivist approach in which youth is socially created and the behaviour of young people is understood as embedded on its socio-economic, cultural and political context. These approaches are complementary and allow us to question what is taken for granted such as what is assumed about youth and also account for the dissonance between norms and deeds (Yanow 2006:19, Gergen 2000:50). By studying young people's subjectivities in growing up, the study sought to capture lived experiences of the young and how economic instability impinges on growing up.

The study took place in 2009-10 during Zimbabwe's worst economic crisis. The crisis started in the 1990s, becoming acute in the 2000s. Such chronic economic instability has been observed to challenge and change ways of being and relations between young and old (Vigh 2008). In addition, young people are caught within the nexus of patriarchy, gerontocracy and globalisation (Diouf 2003). The resultant contradictions have been described as "crises" for instance by Giddens (1992) to point to scrambled normative ways of being and weakening social bonds leading to incongruence between social expectations and practicable options. The study uses the concept of "emerging adulthood" following Arnett (2000, 2007), Arnett and Taber (1994), Flacks (2007), Hartmann and Swartz (2007) and Berzin and de Marco (2010) to highlight structural challenges due to neoliberal globalisation which have changed old traditions and customs (such as bridewealth) and idealised new means (such as schooling, credentials and wage work) by which adulthood is achieved, and point to the instability and transience visited on young both in their social environments and in strategies open to young people (such as licit and illicit informal sector work). Zimbabwe's crisis saw a growing number of young people resorting to the informal sector to seek means to earn a living and to augment incomes. Their visibility in public, seemingly idle and flouting national laws and bye-laws, exasperated many officials and adults (Kamete 2008, 2013). These emerging practices have in fact been a basis for stereotyping young people as lazy, lacking discipline and given to criminality. These reactions characterised by stereotyping, vilification and contradictions show gerontocratic and patriarchal interests in attempts to discipline youth. These interests not only influence young people's experiences of growing up, they are part of the fleeting role models and conflicting messages which add to the instability.

The thesis has eight chapters: three on background, context and conceptual and methodological issues and four on empirical findings. Each of the four empirical chapters responds to one sub-research question. Titles of each chapter are based on recurring refrains, metaphors and statements hence narratives through which research respondents reacted to the issues under discussion in each question. Narratives are taken as shared meanings, explanations of individuals' worldviews, and means of deflecting reflected appraisals (Callero 2003, Ezzy 1998, Kaufman and Johnson 2004, Wiklund-Gustin 2010, Nencel 2005). Narratives are not politically neutral but are embedded in social relationships and the social environment in which they are uttered (Callero 2003, Ezzy 1998), thus a means to understanding subjectivities of young people. In this regard, chapter 4 explores multi-dimensional "restrictions" and its antithesis "running around" as experiences of being young. These restrictions are in the form of rules, social norms at home and school about what young persons can and cannot do as well as the socio-economic contexts and opportunities they offers or deny the young. It shows that due to economic decline some young people have become cynical about schooling, as they do not see its benefits in the wake of chronic unemployment and low wages in the civil service (the most accessible forms of wage work). Some have dropped out of school to fend for themselves and help struggling kin through creative employment in licit and illicit informal sector activities hence "running round". Those who remained at school did so in obedience to parents but still face limited prospects for employment. Those in the informal sector have become aware of its relatively low incomes, the challenges of living independently, paying for accommodation, transport, remittances to expectant kin and having to save for bridewealth. Their narratives reveal both their wishes to comply with normative narratives of achieving adulthoods and the intractable challenges they have to contend with on a day-to-day basis and strategically.

Chapter 5 discusses experiences of living in Beitbridge under the heading "impossible youth or an impossible situation" to address the contestation between adults' essentialist views of young people as innately determined versus young people's situational arguments. Citing living arrangements of respondents the chapter shows that many young people are socialised into a life of defying officials, cynicism and lying by what they observe in the social environment but also as part of deflecting and managing reflected appraisals (Kaufman and Johnson 2004).

In chapter 6, the research addresses ideal sexuality versus realities that young people have to contend with hence "from not playing with boys, *kukech(w)a* and informal marriages". Sexuality is understood as embedded in everyday sociality where deviations from propriety are likely to be taken as pointers to a propensity for immorality (Jackson and Scott 2010). Thus some forms of mobility, clothing and friendships with the opposite sex and older persons are seen as evidence of or inclinations towards illicit sexual practices. The chapter shows some challenges presented by socialisation such as the interdict that girls should not play with non-kin boys at home and at school, and how these teachings are not heeded by respondents. The quest for economically dominant males in an environment where employment opportunities have shrunk is also discussed. Given difficulties of paying bridewealth and the need to demonstrate trustworthiness, informal marriages become a halfway house to proper marriage but most fizzle out before formalisation leaving young women with children they cannot care for and pushing them into transactional sex and sex work. Thus these challenges lock some young people in relationships which do not allow them to be recognised as social adults through bridewealth marriages. In this vein, sexuality as subsumed in daily practices of youth leads to heightened anxiety on the part of adults as known surveillance and monitoring fail. Parents understand the need for mobility and in some cases sponsor it, but also know that mobility means reduced accountability of youth to adults. Further

sexuality has changed as seen in the conflation of economic and emotional security needs making sexuality a survival strategy of the last resort, especially but not exclusively, for female youth (Chant and Evans 2010). This happens as normative narratives of achieving adulthood through bridewealth marriages in patrilineal cultures such as practiced in Zimbabwe are under strain as young men's ability to save enough to pay bridewealth as well as to provide for independent households is challenged by endemic unemployment. Meanwhile the deferral of marriage on account of failure to meet the right partner leads to relationships characterised by different forms of "needs driven" dating (Nguyen 2007) also known as transactional sex. This study shows that young people have diverse needs due to real and relative poverty. For instance, in-school youth need "modern" school lunches and snacks while out-of-school youth have personal up-keep and kin obligations to fulfill. Needs driven dating reveals agentive strategies of young people even though these are non-transformative and understood as socially and physically degrading to their practitioners.

The study also finds that youth resort to faith and traditional healing and beliefs in spirits in the management of income generating activities and sexual practices, revealing as discussed in chapter 7. Not only do these practices point to an acute sense of vulnerability and powerlessness on the part of research participants, they also allow youth to attribute their circumstances to societal causes rather than personal failings as adults and prevailing neoliberal ideologies claim. Officials and other adults, driven by common beliefs that youth practices are socially disruptive, often overlook the societal origins and bases of these practices. Youth strategies in this instance show youth disaffection, alienation from society but also a need to come back into the fold of kin relations. This is because these beliefs and attendant consultation of traditional and faith healers reiterate the quest for good social relations as a source of well-being and achievement of one's dreams. However the strategies show the limits of youth agency as alternative health practitioners insist on explanations and solutions that mystify the lived realities of young people by attributing them to supernatural issues.

In the conclusions, (chapter 8) the study shows that youth is socially created by socio-economic and cultural circumstances. The study concludes that despite the agency of youth, their actions have ambiguous outcomes as they are not transformative. This points to intractable structural challenges whose origins and dynamics are beyond the power of these young people to change.