Waithood, Developmental Pathways, Coping and Resilience among South African Youths who Head Families

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Abstract

This article draws from the narratives of the lives of three South African youths who head families. It is based on a longitudinal study conducted from 2012 to 2016 in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa. It explores the developmental pathways of youths heading their families following the deaths of their parents and how these youths cope with challenges associated with the transition to adulthood. The article engages with the concept of waithood as a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood and expands into existing western-dominant theories of human development from a social constructionist perspective. Data obtained from the narratives of these participants from the global South challenge the dominant westernised understanding of individualised youth transition to adulthood, from various human development theories. The article argues that young people who head their families (after the death of their parents) forge alternative pathways to adulthood, which expands into the conventional Eriksonian-staged approach to youth development. The alternative pathways these youths forge tend to be relational rather than individualised and are embedded in social relations with their siblings, the extended family and networks of supporters and mentors. The findings also reveal that young people who head their families use their agency and creativity to fashion new ways of coping and resilience as they navigate their own unique pathways to adulthood.

Introduction

The area of developmental pathways of young people in youth-headed families is not well documented, especially in the global South. This article explores this topic, with a specific focus on the South African context, where child-headed households are a common and increasing social phenomenon. The article approaches the topic from a developmental theory perspective. It critically engages with the concept of waithood which is defined as a suspension of adulthood (Dhillon and Yousef 2007; Honwana 2012, 2014). Many young people who assume roles as heads of households forge alternative pathways to adulthood, responding to their particular personal circumstances and situations, as opposed to more conventional or traditional individualised transitions, as, for example, proposed by Erik Erikson in 1959. For these young people, navigating their way to adulthood is not as individualised as conventional western theories would suggest, but are rather more relational in nature. These pathways are influenced and/or shaped by each individual's specific and unique social and economic context, as well as by the structural constraints resulting from parental loss with which these individuals must cope.

The article is based on a qualitative longitudinal narrative study of three youth heads of households in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa, between 2012 and 2016. The initial study was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis (Soji 2013) and it was based on the narratives of the lives of six youth-headed families who were able to remain together as a family following the death of their parents. The initial study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, needs and coping strategies of youth-headed families in Port Elizabeth. Six families were selected by means of purposive sampling and data were collected utilising multiple methods, such as one-on-one narrative interviews with young people heading their households and family focus group interviews with members of the selected six youth-headed families. The findings of the initial study reported on the experiences of the young people heading their households related to managing the transition to sibling care, in terms of changes in their everyday practices. The multiplicity of adult roles that the youth heads undertook, particularly those of decision makers, leaders, and providers of the practical and economic needs of the household, and the lack of emotional support and guidance as well as marginalisation by their communities, were reported as key challenges faced by the young people heading their families. The study also reported on the coping strategies employed by the youth heads of the households and these included suppression of emotions and negative experiences, self-education and seeking information to make decisions as well as delaying educational and personal aspirations in order to look after the well-being of their siblings (Soji 2013). In 2016 the researcher followed up with three participants, and this article is based on the findings of the narrative interviews with the three participants.

Although there are many perspectives on youth transition within human development literature (Arnett 2000; Erikson 1959; Flemming 2004), existing literature tends to focus

on a generalised experience of youth, with limited attention paid to the diverse social, cultural and economic contexts of young people, which have an impact on their transition to adulthood (Erikson 1959; Flemming 2004). These contexts make the transition of young people who are heading their families more complex than that of a linear progression from dependence to independence (Evans 2010; Lyons-Ruth, Holmes, and Heninghausen 2005). In line with this thinking, a few studies (Day and Evans 2015; Evans 2012; Soji, Pretorius and Bak 2015; Van Dijk 2008) that explored the circumstances of youth-heading households and caregiving in South Africa and in Africa support the call to take into account the cultural and social context that shapes the life transitions of young people who are heading households. The collective nature of the African culture emphasises the needs of the group to which one belongs and therefore relationality and solidarity become important in understanding the developmental pathways of young people heading households. This resonates with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. Statements that epitomise the essence of *ubuntu* is reflected in phrases such as "my child is your child" and "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (one is a person through others). These phrases, which define what *ubuntu* is, emphasise the importance of solidarity, belongingness, empathy, caring, and sharing. Mbigi, in his writings about *ubuntu*, states that "the heart and soul of Ubuntu is the solidarity principle, group conformity and care in the face of survival challenges, based on unconditional group compassion, respect, dignity, trust, openness and cooperation" (quoted in Swanepoel et al. 2008, 360).

Concepts and Theory

Human Development Theory

A traditional western developmental perspective views young people's interactions within the contexts of their daily lives as the primary determinants of their preparation for healthy adulthood (Larson 2000). One such view is embedded in the Human Development Theory of Erikson (1959) which conceptualises human development in seven stages, namely (1) trust vs mistrust; (2) autonomy vs shame and doubt; (3) initiative vs guilt; (4) industry vs inferiority; (5) identity vs role confusion; (6) intimacy vs isolation, and (7) ego integrity vs despair. Erikson argues that proceeding through all of the seven stages of development is essential in the development process. He refers to the presence of a specific developmental crisis at each stage that must be resolved as a requirement for healthy growth. Successful resolution of such a crisis at each stage is assumed to provide impetus for optimal personal growth and development and serves as preparation for individuals to become "productive members of society" (Singhal and Howard 2003, 5). Failure to resolve such a crisis will result in fixed and retarded growth. Critiques of this theory question its emphasis on the completion of stages rather than focusing on continuous development that is shaped by different factors and conditions that influence the direction and course of development (Ansell 2013; Ungar 2012). This article aligns itself with these critiques, with specific focus on the contextual experiences of South African youths.

Ungar (2012) and Ansell (2013) pose two critical questions, namely "What would be the cross-cultural indicators for adulthood?" and "What are the benchmarks of healthy youth development and transitions to adulthood in different communities?" These authors posit that youths should be viewed as a social construct that should take contextual variables like culture, ethnicity, location and gender into consideration when looking at issues of human development. Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest that young people should be viewed as citizens with rights and responsibilities, as members of a social group and agents with voices to be heeded. As social actors, young people are understood as able to shape society through their own experiences, as well as being shaped by their circumstances. In this paradigm, young people are perceived not only as "becoming adults", but also as "beings in themselves" (Van Dijk 2008).

Existing literature on child- and youth-headed households in Africa indicate that an environment for healthy growth and well-being is compromised by the significant challenges faced by youths who head their families (Evans 2010; Soji, Pretorius, and Bak 2015; Van Dijk 2008). Instead of growing up in positive, safe and supportive environments that enable positive growth, young people who head their families have to deal with role changes that require them to become decision makers as they become responsible for the social and economic futures of their families. These studies further state that the multiplicity of adult roles often leads to developmental delays that can have implications for healthy transitions to adulthood. Such responsibilities can, for example, relate to decision-making, leadership, the responsibility of providing for the practical and economic needs of the household, caring for younger siblings with all of the challenges related to disciplinary issues, conflict management, and housekeeping.

Theoretical Perspectives on Waithood in Youths

The concept of waithood was first coined by Diane Singerman (2007). Singerman and later Navteg Dhillon and Tarik Yousef (2007) used this concept to refer to a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood. Their research focused on understanding ways in which young people in different contexts such as North Africa and the Middle East endure years of waiting to enter into adulthood owing to political, social and economic exclusions. Findings of these studies (cited in Honwana 2012, 2014) reveal that waithood "encompasses the multifaceted nature of youth transitions to adulthood, which goes beyond securing a job and extends to social life and civic participation". Carling (2015) however, proposes the concept of "navigation" as opposed to "transition", which implies directionality, commonality and a shift from one condition or phase to another. This article likewise agrees that transition as a concept is restrictive, minimises the role of individual agency and does not take into account the continuous development that is shaped by different factors and conditions that influence the direction and course of individual development. It aligns itself with Carling's metaphor of social navigation. Social navigation refers to the dynamic interplay between the navigator, the process of navigation and the environment being navigated (Carling 2015). Social navigation, as opposed to transitioning, is preferred here since it "produces the connotation of openness and an absence of predetermined directionality" (Carling

2015, 2). This is specifically applicable to the South African context given the multifaceted realities of youths emanating from their political and social contexts. Carling (2015) furthermore refers to a repertoire of pathways that are socially constructed and individually held. Carling argues that young people within a community are likely to have a broadly shared, but not identical, mental repertoire of possibilities.

Literature on waithood suggests that while it describes a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood, this phenomenon can be voluntary and involuntary. Alcinda Honwana (2012) refers to voluntary waithood as a period when privileged youths may choose to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood. In this case, waithood becomes a short interruption in the transition to adulthood. However, for many young people in youth-headed households, waithood represents an involuntary delay (in the attainment of social markers) to adulthood.

For these youths waithood can result from the multiplicity of the demands linked to the role of being the head of a family. These demands range from survival strategies, such as decisions to delay educational achievements or entering into marriage, to putting the needs of their families ahead of their own needs for growth and development. Despite being active drivers of social and economic change in their families, these youths continue to struggle to secure social inclusion and recognition as fully fledged adults in their communities and to some extent in society at large, and they are relegated to the margins of society, as they do not meet the traditional socially accepted indicators of adulthood (Evans 2010; Soji, Pretorius, and Bak 2015; Van Dijk 2008). For these young people, waithood involves a long process of negotiating personal identity and independence in contexts that make it somewhat impossible to achieve such independence.

During the analysis of the initial narratives of these young people (Soji 2013), the research revealed that the adult responsibilities they fulfil did not appear to qualify them for adulthood based on their communities' construction of independence and adulthood. This view resonates with the findings of a study by Van Dijk (2008) of child-headed households in South Africa, where Van Dijk refers to characteristics such as independence as an ability to take care of oneself, whether one is still at school or not, with marital status and male circumcision as social indicators that one has reached adulthood. Similarly, the findings of a study by Evans (2010) in Tanzania and Uganda on the experiences and priorities of young people caring for their siblings suggest that marriage is still regarded as one of the social markers of adulthood in African countries (such as Ghana, Cameroon, Tanzania and Uganda) and influences communities' perception of young people. This has implications for their participation and integration into communities as important social actors who can make meaningful contributions. This article examines the narrative stories of three young people in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, who are the heads of households, and investigates their self-reflection on their pathways to adulthood these youths forged for themselves. The narratives for this study were recorded four years after the original research study was conducted in 2012.

Resilience and Coping

The constructivist perspective of resilience defines resilience as the outcome of negotiations between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition of health and resilience (Ungar 2004, 352). According to Ungar, these outcomes, whether positive or negative, should be interpreted within the pathogenic or salutogenic discourses in which the negotiation takes place. The constructivist perspective of resilience posits that health resides in all individuals, even when significant impairment is present. Resilience therefore is conceptualised as "the successful negotiation by the individual for health resources, with success depending for its definition on the reciprocity individuals experience between themselves and the social constructions of well-being that shape their interpretations of their health status" (Ungar 2004, 352).

This article utilises Meursing's (1997) task model of coping. In this model, coping is seen as a set of efforts to achieve certain goals or tasks. When a person is confronted with a challenging and stressful situation, he/she will generally appraise the resources available to deal with the situation. Coping therefore is influenced by the resources one can mobilise. These resources can be found for instance within the individual, the family and the external environment (for example the availability of social support and community resources).

Limitations of the Study

It is acknowledged that the limitations of this study are twofold, namely the small size of the sample group and the representativeness of the sample of a larger socio-cultural demographic group. This study can serve to establish research parameters for larger and more expansive future studies on the topic of youth heads of households in the global South.

Methods

A qualitative research approach, with the narrative method as a strategy of inquiry was employed. Since this is a longitudinal study, purposive sampling was employed to select youth heads of families who participated in the initial study in 2012. The following inclusion criteria were used for the selection of research participants: they had to continue residing in a youth-headed household within Port Elizabeth, fulfil the role of head of an unaccompanied household, and participate voluntarily in the study. Only three youth heads from the 2012 study met the criteria for inclusion in this study.

Data were collected by means of two individual interviews with each participant and essay writing. Essay writing, as a method of data gathering, proved to be effective as the participants were able to retrospectively reflect extensively on their journeys since 2012. During the first contact in 2012 with these participants, the author made use of a lifeline activity (Chan 2008), which is a visual tool that provides personal histories as constructed by the participants. The participants are required to present different facets of their lives and different events, in a form of storytelling with events reflected on a

horizontal time line. Though unconventional this tool was very effective, as it served as an icebreaker prior to gathering information of a more personal nature. Participants in the second study were invited again to draw their lifelines, between 2012 and 2016, to reflect on their journey. The interviews were based on the reflections and descriptions of their lifelines.

Data were analysed by means of a narrative content analysis that involved two broad phases, namely the descriptive phase and the interpretive phase, as suggested by Smith (2008). The author started the process by reading the narrative accounts and/or data set of each participant. This process preceded both phases, as it allowed for the identification of key themes and sub-themes within the broader narrative. Once the themes were identified, a coding frame was developed and applied to all of the narratives to capture the overall meaning of the story lines running through all of the narratives. Four main themes were identified from the coding process: (i) experiences regarding waithood in youth-heading households, (ii) navigating pathways to adulthood; (iii) coping with waithood, and (iv) factors that enable resilience. In the following section these themes will be discussed, using examples from the participants' narratives and this will be related back to the earlier theoretical discussion in preceding sections of this article.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were accorded the right to make informed, voluntary decisions about the research thus a full disclosure about the research and the process of research was given in writing. No names of persons were used from the onset of the research and only pseudonyms are used in this article. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from all the relevant institutional bodies (Ref H18-HEA-SDP-002).

Presentation of Findings

Introduction of Participants

Participant 1: Bonga is 31 years old and lives with his three sisters: Anelisa, 25, who left school in Grade 12 before completing matric; Thabisa, 21, who completed her matric but is currently unemployed; and Zanele, 16, who is in Grade 10, and who is HIV positive. Bonga completed an N3 certificate in 2009, but was unemployed at the time of the study. He was 15 years old when he first assumed the responsibility of heading his household.

Participant 2: Andiswa is 23 years old and lives with her younger brother Sipho, who is 15 years old and in Grade 8 and her younger sister Siphokazi, who is 11 years old and in Grade 3. They have an older brother Themba, who is 29 years old. Themba moved out of the family home a few months after the death of their mother and therefore Andiswa had to fulfil the role of head of the household.

Participant 3: Lindy is 27 years old and is the oldest child in her family. She became the head of the family after the death of her parents when she was 16 years old. Lindy has a sister, Nandi, who is 23 years old. She also had a brother, Sezi, 26, who passed away in 2016 when he committed suicide. Currently Lindy stays with her sister, Nandi, and her three-year-old niece (who is Nandi's child).

The storyline has four main themes with related sub-themes and these are discussed in the next section.

Theme One: Experiences of Waithood in Youth-headed Households

In all three participant's cases involuntary waithood could be identified, since heading their families was not a matter of choice. As the oldest siblings, they were obliged to assume adult roles. Some of the participants expressed a long-term commitment to care for their siblings until they had completed school and were able to support themselves financially. This meant delaying completing education and achieving the financial means to marry and support their own families. Others had delayed decisions about entering marriage and forming their own families to care for their siblings.

As head of the household, Bonga had to drop out of school to look after his siblings and he shared the following about the daily challenges he experienced:

> It was not easy, especially for me, as I am the oldest and our (parents') death affected me in a very negative way. It was not easy also, because I did not receive the results I wanted at school, because I was dealing with all the other problems at home. For example, imagine how I felt having to come home every day after school and have to take care of my ill sister. My younger sister is HIV positive and on ARVs and therefore she needed 24-hour care.

Bonga struggled to get a job and this meant he could not fulfil his dream of furthering his education and thereby obtain the social indicators commonly associated with adulthood, such as leaving school with a good education, securing employment, getting married and having his own family. Bonga's story is similar to that of Andiswa. Like many young people who are tasked with caregiving responsibilities, she had to delay her educational aspirations after school to care for her siblings. Andiswa left school with very few skills and as a result was unable to obtain employment. As a family, they continue to rely on a social grant.

Andiswa shared the following:

> There was no way for me to continue with my studies. Everything is depended on me and everybody is relying on me. I must also worry about food and my siblings. What can I do? I can't change this situation. I love my brother and my sister so much and all that I want to do, is to look after them and to make sure that they have everything they need. I want them to succeed in life. I will get an opportunity one day to go to university,

but now I have to continue looking for a job or build my business so that I can support my family.

Lindy reported that community cultural beliefs, values and attitudes influenced some of the community members' ability to acknowledge and accept her as an adult, despite her age and having completed her basic university degree, which enabled her to secure a job. This stems from traditional beliefs about adulthood, which Lindy does not meet in her community and the fact that community members still see the youth heads of households as "children who do not have business to care for others". Lindy shared the following on this matter:

> I remember the times when the community members were telling us that we have no business living on our own as children and they said we should not be allowed to stay on our own. What choices did we have? Did they give us solutions? No! No! They watched us from a distance and they said we would not make it. They still think I am a child just because I am still unmarried and I am still living in my parents' house …

Lindy faced critical moments that had a significant impact on her ability to navigate her pathways to adulthood according to wider social norms and expectations. She spoke about how she struggled to make ends meet for herself and her siblings, with her brother irresponsibly spending money, getting involved in drugs, trying to commit suicide, and when he eventually succeeded, it was Lindy who found his body. Responding to the question about the theoretical assumption that young people who have experienced unfortunate circumstances are trapped in childhood and do not move to the adult phase, Lindy responded with passion, indicating that she disagreed: "How can you go through what I went through and still be a child?"

She acknowledges that she might have skipped some child developmental tasks, but that was because she had to become "the adult" prematurely:

> I want to disagree! I think it depends on a person. I am not waiting for adulthood. I know I am a young adult. It does not matter what others say. Some of us take different routes to adulthood. It is not the same for everyone. How can you go through what I went through and still be a child? I may have missed some of the other stages perhaps according to them, but I allowed myself to play when I needed to. I didn't do things that other teenagers did like experimenting because there was no time for me to do that. Sometimes situations force you to be an adult.

Despite the difficulties experienced these youths see themselves in the context of the family. Family values and loyalty motivated their perseverance and sacrifice of personal needs. For instance, Bonga shared the following:

> It's my heart's desire to get married one day but, at the moment my family is top priority … As an African child, I was raised with the saying that I am because of others and therefore I have an obligation towards my family.

The ability to care for the emotional, social and economic needs of their families was key to the participants' understanding of gaining "adult" status.

Theme Two: Navigating Pathways to Adulthood

Navigation in the context of youths heading their families refers to the conscious efforts made by these young people to assess the challenges of their situations and the possibilities available to them, irrespective of whether these possibilities are perceived to be falling outside the socially accepted norms held by their communities, as they plot ways to achieve their goals. For some this may mean a decision to leave school in pursuit of employment opportunities and to undertake piecework to meet the basic needs of the family, with a view of returning to school at a later stage. For instance, Andiswa decided to leave school to open a hair salon in her endeavour to ensure the economic well-being of her family, and Lindy decided that staying at school was critical; this ensured that they were able to access certain resources that were provided to orphans and vulnerable children (food, skills and mentorship). The participants reported that they continuously negotiate pathways that they hope will lead to a better future for themselves and their families.

For Bonga, going back to school was important. He shared the following:

> I know that when we spoke I had left school without good results so I could not do what I wanted to do. I just looked for a job but my siblings encouraged me to also do something for myself, so a year later after we spoke, I went to school to rewrite my matric. I am happy that I received positive results, then I went to register at Unisa for a diploma in youth development which I am busy with currently. I believe this will improve my life and that of my family.

These pathways, however, are shaped or influenced by the context of each individual. While there may be differences in their choice of pathways to take, the responses under this theme showed that ubuntu and relationality guided decisions taken by the participants.

Theme Three: Factors that Enable Coping of Youth Heads of Families

Coping for the young people in this study meant being able to survive the daily challenges and hardships and remain together as a family, with hopes and dreams for the future, in spite of the challenges experienced. Various coping strategies were utilised by the individual heads of the families, namely (i) putting personal needs on hold while acting as head of the household, (ii) creating and holding on to heroic and positive stories as a way of coping, (iii) attaching to others and mobilising social support, and (iv) forgiving oneself.

Sub-theme 3.1: Putting Personal Needs and Wants on Hold while Acting as Head of the Household

Participants' narratives demonstrated that their own core emotional and guidance needs from a previous stage had to be ignored for a choice to face the challenges of a parental role. Bonga indicated the following:

> You yourself feel that you still need to be nurtured, led, and be guided also in other things in life and so on. But you find yourself having to take that lead. What can you do, family is important, so, it is about putting my own need aside and make sure that my family is ok. That helps me to go on in life. To me the value of having a family after I lost my parents … and my sisters, they are everything to me and I value that.

Bonga had to learn to let go of what could have been if his parents were alive.

Andiswa believes that she is honouring her promise to her mother and therefore she cannot focus on her own needs. She indicated that being an adult means taking responsibility and not running away from her problems:

> My mother asked me before she died to look after the family. I have been doing what she asked for. I am happy to do it for her. I don't see myself getting married, because if I do, what will happen to my siblings? I just want us to be okay. I cannot run away from this plus taking care of them makes me to forget about my problems.

As can be seen from the narrative of participants, they see themselves in the context of the family; as a result, the collective actions and needs of the family are valued most. In these cases, the participants felt obligated to place the needs of their family above their own personal needs or goals. The suppression of personal needs and focusing on family needs demonstrated the spirit of ubuntu, solidarity and the need to have more control over circumstances. When asked to elaborate on the consequences of the choice to ignore their own personal and guidance needs, there was a tendency among all of the participants to focus more on the positive consequences of this decision. This is a strategy to facilitate perseverance and ultimately survival, despite huge trauma and difficulty (Soji 2013).

Sub-theme 3.2: Creating and Holding on to Heroic and Positive Stories as a Way of Coping

The participants were seeking an identity as heroic, competent and resilient individuals and were able to negotiate for this by portraying their stories of heroism in a positive light. In this way, their stories of hope and coping replaced the tragedy of their situation (Soji, Pretorius, and Bak 2015). For example, Lindy said,

> I was named a change-maker … I went to US to speak at a conference. President Clinton heard me at that time so when he came to SA, he wanted to meet me. He had a conference on South African Clinton Potential Change Makers in South Africa. He was very excited and said I want you to join because I believe you are one of my youngest

change-makers here South Africa. So, I had an opportunity to meet him and it was amazing.

Bonga shared the following:

In my sisters' eyes, I am a hero. One day I will be able to tell my children about how we succeeded in life and the sacrifices I had to make for my family.

This thinking is in line with the theory of positive selves. King and Raspin (2004) quoting the work of Markus and Nurius (1986), refer to possible selves as representations of the broad range of imaginable, possible futures. These representations serve as motivators for current behaviour and therefore contribute towards coping in the face of challenges. These positives selves are relational and are therefore rooted in interactions with others (Van Breda 2010), as reflected in the narratives above.

Sub-theme 3.3: Attaching to Others and Mobilising Social Support

In most of the cases, the youth heads could identify elderly people and neighbours to whom they could voice their concerns and express their needs. These people were consulted regularly, and the youths regarded them as possessing the required insight and wisdom. Sources of support referred to the availability of adults who act as mentors, spiritual support and sibling support.

Lindy spoke about the role played by mentors:

Mentors supported me towards young adulthood. You need mentors that you need assistance from. When I feel sad, I know who to call. If there is one thing we need people who listen ... There are always people in life who offer you support. All you need to do is to lean on them.

Some of the young people interpreted their experiences in terms of their belief in the power of God's will and the view that there is a purpose for everything in life. The conviction that God is in control, was echoed by some of the participants in the study. For example, Bonga shared the following:

Jesus is my teacher. He was tempted and tested but remained strong. You know, the church plays a very important role in my life. At church, you meet people so you actually learn from their experiences, so I think you get a chance to be a learner and this contributes towards being an adult.

Siblings were reported to be a significant source of emotional support. The sense of collectiveness and collaboration in thinking and actions facilitated coping.

Andiswa spoke about the support she gets from her siblings when she feels down:

They are always there for me. We sit down and we talk about everything that is happening. Maybe someone wants to say something that is bothering her or him. We share everything and when we see that one of us is bothered by something, we ask the person what is going on. We communicate all the time. I see my family as a family with love.

Sub-theme 3.4: Forgiving Oneself

The ability to forgive oneself was identified as key in the narratives of the youth heads in this study. For instance, Bonga spoke about how he struggled to deal with his decision to postpone marriage in his life. As a born-again Christian, he watched his friends getting married and receiving senior positions at church as they were regarded as being at a higher level (referring to adulthood). The institution of marriage is regarded as important and those who marry are celebrated as they are seen to fulfil God's mandate. For a long time he felt guilty that he was not fulfilling God's purpose. He spoke about how he ended up using alcohol as an escape and how this affected him and his siblings. His siblings confronted him about his drinking. When he realised that he was going through difficulties, he decided to speak to them about it:

> Whenever I see myself in a position where I feel like I've done wrong, I admit and say to them look I failed you here in this and that way and I am glad that you also see this, which means you won't continue committing the same wrong. We talk and guide each other and I also forgive myself, and make peace with the fact that I have done something and it is wrong. Life is about navigating your life through things, it's not about being perfect and being right all the time.

Theme Four: Factors that Enable Resilience of Youth Heads of Households

The following factors were identified as enabling resilience among the study participants: (i) perseverance and determination, (ii) positive attitude, and (iii) social networks as a core protective factor.

Sub-theme 4.1: Perseverance and Determination

Perseverance and determination were evident in the narratives of participants. In the face of the hardships experienced, there was a sense that the success of the family depended on the strength and determination of its oldest members. When asked to explain this, the participants shared the following:

> I always think of my family and my dreams for my sister. This encourages me to hold on and not to give up. I never compromise, I know what I want and I focus on my dreams. It is about knowing what I want. For me when I fall and I don't get up, it is like I am dead. As long as you have dreams and tasks to fulfil, you, you have to continue to pick yourself up when you fall no matter how painful it becomes. My sister is looking up to me so I cannot give up. I know that we will succeed any difficulties together. (Lindy)

I needed to be strong, because my siblings are younger than me and I am not supposed to cry in front of them. I do feel the pain, but then I will remind myself of the pain my parents experienced when they were alive and tell myself that it is better this way. I also tell myself that I can't cry in front of my younger siblings, because I will not be giving them hope when I cry. I have to be strong for them throughout this whole experience. (Andiswa)

Sub-theme 4.2: Positive Attitude

The young people participating in this study displayed a positive outlook on life and a determination to survive, despite their circumstances. This facilitated a move towards finding effective ways of managing the challenges they were confronted with and negotiating different pathways to their preferred future. The following statement reflects this positive attitude:

I like to focus on the positives and focusing on the future than the past. I have learned that I am able to overcome things and even though I do not like to focus on the past, I do not give up easily. I am confident of myself that when things go wrong, I just keep on trying. When I fail, I take failure as an event. It does not mean the end of my life. I don't take myself as a failure. I do not let that define me. It also does not mean I will always fail. I realise that the things that happened in my life have shaped me to be a better and a strong person. When I looked back to the past four years of my life as I was doing this exercise, I thought to myself: Who would have known that things will work out and that I will be sitting here today? (Lindy)

Andiswa shared the following:

Sometimes people drink when confronted by problems, because they do not have hope. They think they will not survive their situation. They do not know that they can make it work. You need to have hope. You need to believe in yourself and know that you can cope with the situation. I know that I did not further my studies but I have hope that things will work out and in the end, I will be successful.

Sub-theme 4.3: Social Networks as a Core Protective Factor

The narrative accounts highlighted the role played by social networks in facilitating the participants' navigation to adulthood. The discussion on social networks centred around three types of networks, namely personal social networks, family networks, and environmental networks. Personal social networks included caring adults outside the family, friends, fellow church members and school contacts. These networks provided interactive and learning spaces. Family networks referred to the connections that existed between the youth heads and their siblings. Environmental networks referred to the role played by neighbours as guides through difficult times. When asked about the role played by the community at large, the participants indicated the lack of support and community involvement. The participants ascribed the lack of and/or limited community involvement and support to changing community values, in which reciprocity had become more evident than the value of ubuntu.

Personally, I think that is a good thing that the neighbours do not do anything for us, because people will always tell others what they have done for you and they will think that you owe them something in return. There is no more ubuntu. People do not give for the sake of giving. I do not want anyone to think that they own me, but I also do not want them to assume without asking that we are okay. (Andiswa)

Discussion and Conclusion

The literature review revealed that normative westernised theoretical frameworks conceptualise subjective markers of adulthood only, such as becoming independent, achieving emotional maturity, gaining financial independence and becoming socially and personally responsible (Arnett 2000; Richter and Panday 2006). From this article, it is evident that pathways towards independence and adulthood for young people, especially those who head their families, do not fit the ideal normative western constructions of transitions to adulthood, instead their pathways are unique, complex, more relational and non-linear. These pathways are dependent on the ability of these young persons to navigate their way through life, despite the challenges inherent in their adult roles. Consequently, these pathways are neither clear-cut nor automatic.

In accordance with Carling's (2015) metaphor of social navigation, this article confirms that young people who are heading their families actively navigate their own unique paths to adulthood which involve exercising agency, constructing effective coping strategies and mobilising social resources available to them. This means that they should be viewed as competent social actors with agency who can achieve resilience.

Ungar (2005) argues that resilience should be viewed and understood in a more ecologically fluid, historically sensitive and culturally anchored way. The narrative accounts of participants reflect that, in spite of the tragedy and the trauma of losing parents and having to navigate through life with limited support, coping and resilience could be found both at individual and familial levels.

This article provides support for authors such as Honwana (2012, 2014) and Carling (2015) who argue that traditional markers of adulthood are no longer the measure by which adulthood should be understood and defined. The article suggests the need to view young people as in the state of "being adults" instead of "becoming adults". This implies a need to enhance our understanding of the process of their navigation of waithood and adulthood, which is influenced and/or facilitated by the dynamic interplay between individual factors, the process of navigation and the environment (context) being navigated. This will aid our understanding of the developmental pathways, needs, coping and resilience of young people who head their families.

It is recommended that the findings from the small sample in this article be used for future research: as a benchmark or foundation for larger studies with more participants, for further longitudinal follow-up interviews with these three participants, for

transnational research about the topic in Africa and also cross-cultural and global studies with other countries in the global South.

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