



The Quest for a Soft Life and the Transition into Adulthood: Views from South African Emerging Adult Students

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A Developmental Perspective on Transitioning into Adulthood

- “Learning to stand alone” = prominent markers of adulthood.
- Financial well-being, identity formation, and other dimensions of emerging adulthood are intricately related.

A Cultural Perspective on Transitioning into Adulthood

- In many African societies, striving for independence and identity is not a solitary pursuit but a collective endeavour.
- Autonomy and agency are not understood in isolation or at the expense of others but rather through harmonious relationships, accountability, and collective thriving.

A Societal (South African) Perspective on Transitioning into Adulthood

- South Africa’s emerging adult cohort is at the heart of the complexity of life in post-apartheid South Africa – lingering inequalities, structural disadvantage, and related hardship prevent them from being economically, politically, socially, and culturally free.
- Their inability to become independent can lead to distress, hopelessness, decreased well-being, and lack of meaning.

Higher Education as a Means to Achieve Independence

- Personal Goal: visions of an improved future lifestyle and upward social mobility.
- Communal Goal: to improve the lives of families and communities.



Aim of the Study: To explore South African students’ experiences as they transition into adulthood, specifically focusing on how the psychological tasks of emerging adulthood are embedded in the socio-economic context.

Research Methods

The study was supported by an interdisciplinary grant from the Office of the Vice-Rector: Research and Internationalisation at the University of the Free State.

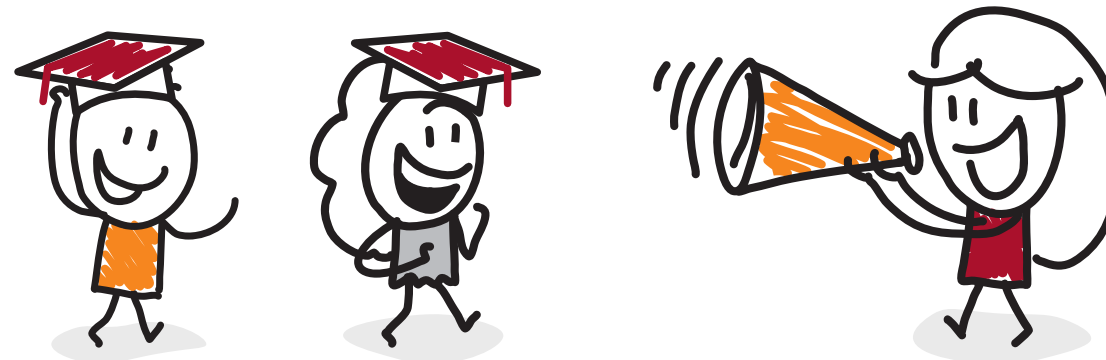
Approach: Qualitative study from an explorative stance

Participants: 26 students; MAge=22.24; 84.6% studied with bursaries (NSFAS).

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews

Interview questions: How does socio-economic status shape/influence the transition into adulthood, specifically perceptions about: “yourself?”; “your participation in campus life?”; “your ability to excel academically?”; and “your motivation?”.

Data analysis: Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2023)



Conclusion

- Participants’ hopes, fears, and well-being (while managing student life shaped by an economically contentious situation) were unpacked.
- Considering the academic, personal, and social threats in their quests for independence, participants appreciated the support from parents, the university, and funders.
- Despite financial obstacles, they portrayed a strong personal commitment and resilience to excel academically, be financially liberated, and break the cycle of poverty.
- Hardship inspired dreams to secure a better future, a ‘soft life’, for themselves and others. Findings reiterate the responsibility of institutions to ensure a just society where emerging adults can flourish into financially stable adulthoods and futures.

In a supportive and empathic environment, the resilience and optimism of emerging adult students (as portrayed in this study) can be harnessed towards futures where they and those around them can flourish and, hopefully, experience the ‘soft life’ they are dreaming about.

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