



Selves within Selves on a University Campus: An interdisciplinary perspective on the flourishing of emerging adults in a transitional society

Luzelle Naudé, Diana Breshears, Shirley du Plooy, Merlene Esau, Kobus Marais, Munyaradzi Mushonga, Jan–Albert van den Berg – University of the Free State, South Africa

Introduction

Emerging adult students engage with the academic and social challenges of higher education, while also transitioning into adulthood = a complex process that entails negotiating various identity domains.

Many aspects of the self and how to flourish in life are foregrounded during the student experience. Campus culture and university life engage diverse individuals in novel environments and with new ideas.

In South Africa, student movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall echoed important societal discourses related to social justice, decolonisation, and inequality in a multicultural society.

Interdisciplinary Research Project Aim

= to gain insight into how emerging adult students flourish in a fast-transforming and decolonising society while they negotiate various aspects of the self.

Positive cultural/psychosocial development is considered, **using an interdisciplinary lens**, transcend beyond academically defined disciplinary paradigms to:

- appreciate the complexity of human experience
- gain a true understanding of interrelated identity domains
- address contemporary social challenges in an interrelated world

The Research Team

An interdisciplinary, interfaculty, and intercampus team, representing various knowledge areas.



Prof Luzelle Naudé
Psychology
Identity & emerging adulthood



Dr Merlene Esau
Social Work
Socio-economic dynamics



Prof Diana Breshears
Communication Science
Communication of identity performances



Prof Jan–Albert van den Berg
Practical and Missional Theology
Narrative identity and practical spirituality



Dr Munyaradzi Mushonga
Gender and Africa Studies
Decolonised identities



Dr Shirley du Plooy
Anthropology
Cultural identities

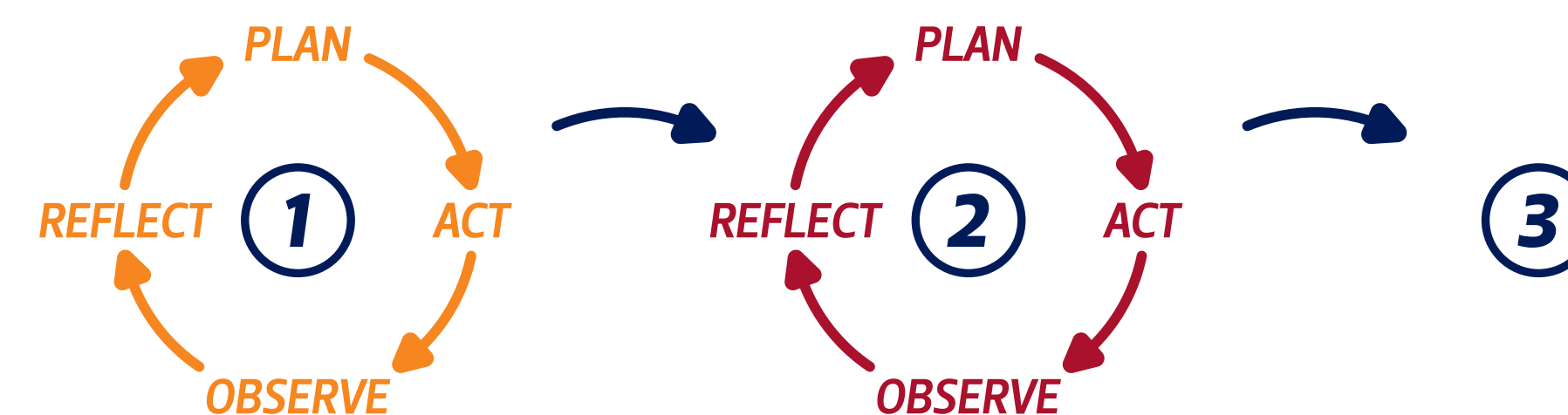


Prof Kobus Marais
Linguistics and Language Practice
Campus culture and transformation

Methods

An Action Research Project

- Cycle 1 (2022–2023): An explorative, descriptive qualitative study embedded in a social constructionist paradigm with students from the University of the Free State
- Cycle 2 (2023–2024): An equal-weight, sequential mixed-methods study, including students from multiple South African institutions
- Cycle 3 (2024–2025): Towards a multi-national endeavour



The interdisciplinary team actively collaborated in all the research phases – various lenses provided diverse perspectives, strengthening research arguments.



Students' voices were prioritised using:

- Reflections on identity artifacts
- More than 60 individual interviews, from three interview schedules
- Eight follow-up focus group discussions

A Participatory Peer Design

Co-researchers = postgraduate students.

- Participants felt more comfortable sharing in-depth experiences with peers
- Post-graduate students articulated valuable learning in their development as emerging scholars
- Novice researchers received exposure and training in research



Paballo Seseli, Zandile Nxele, Kutloano Molumo, Elam Lami, Zandile Viti, Lerato Sokhaya, Kgabo Mphela, Boitumelo Sehlabaka, Kenelwe Chologi, Mpho Tsiloane, Mapaseka Tlaetsi, and Phelokazi Gili

Preliminary Findings from Specific Research Clusters

Representations of student identity (Language practice & Psychology)	'Don't put me in a box' <i>Uniqueness and multi-dimensionality: a person is not black and white... you're not one thing... you are not one-dimensional... it's bits and parts that make you... I am all these things in one. Don't try to put me in a box (M3).</i> One Piece of a Bigger Puzzle <i>The relational nature of the self: I'm a piece of the puzzle, so there's somewhere in this world that I fit in. So, one way or another, I will find that space (U1).</i>
First-generation student identity negotiations (Psychology & Communication)	'To be the first' <i>First-generation student status as a new identity for self and family: I am the one who will represent my family... my parents will say that: 'our daughter went to university'... this has even given us a title that no one thought will have it. People who had given up in my family are now inspired ... I finally made it (H2.7–9) they are looking up to me, as a new breadwinner... you are going to change the situation and upgrade us" (D2.56–60)</i>
Practical Spirituality and student life (Psychology, Theology/ Religion, & Language practice)	Spirituality at the intersection between Western and African cosmologies <i>Uhm, as the bible says ... we are here to fulfil a purpose that God has for us in life. So, the meaning that I have already assigned to my life is fulfilling that purpose ... and then there's a quote that says, "we are our ancestors wildest dreams". So, I believe that my ancestors already have certain things in mind for me ... they want me to do certain things for them, and also for the clan and the family. So already that shapes how I look at my life and how I assign different meanings to it ... So, you see how everything contributes to how I view my life (B3.22)</i>
Financial Wellbeing during the Transition (Psychology & Social Work)	Money doesn't define me <i>titles don't define us, money doesn't mean anything, status means nothing to who you are as a person because there's more to being you than just your socio-economic status (A1.64)</i> <i>It's not about money, but passion ... I still feel like me; there are some needs that I get and then there are some ones that I can't get, which is not a train smash (D1.29)</i> Dreaming of a "Soft Live" (Future of Financial Freedom) <i>I just want to get out of this hellhole, so yeah, and it motivates me to just do better; try to better my life (E1.34)</i> <i>It actually pushes, it pushes. So more like a motivation that one day it will be better; if I study now the future looks more brighter ... I just have to get rid of the obstacles in the mid-way in order for me to get to that bright side... someday I also wanna drive a Benz... (U1.83)</i>
Cultural Rites of Passage into Adulthood (Psychology, Anthropology & Social Work)	<i>I went through that identity crisis until I went to initiation... during my initiation, I realised the strength that I have as a black woman... the traditional music and food and everything. It made me realise that as a black female, I have so much power, and I am big... in a spiritual sense, my initiation contributed a lot to my identity. It contributed a lot. And that identity crisis ended. It stopped, and I fully accepted that I'm a black person. (J3.80)</i>

The way forward

- This research project can contribute to the production of knowledge that is engaged, interdisciplinary, and contextual in nature.
- The synthesis of ideas from various disciplinary fields will facilitate a deeper understanding of the multifaceted phenomenon of emerging adult identity in an understudied society.
- The interdisciplinary collaboration facilitated the establishment of partnerships across departments/centres/faculties/campuses, consolidating future endeavours and securing a second cycle of funding (2023–2024) for establishing an interdisciplinary research hub.

For more information, contact: **Luzelle Naudé**, University of the Free State, South Africa, naudel@ufs.ac.za

www.ufs.ac.za

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