

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE FUTURE ORIENTATION OF EMERGING ADULTS IN CAMEROON

Joseph Lah Lo-oh
University of Buea
CAMEROON

ABSTRACT

Growing up adult in Africa appears to be an arduous task necessitated by very difficult life conditions which have left most emerging adults hopeless about the future of their adulthood. Caught up in situations where services are unevenly distributed, young people languish in abject poverty, unemployment, under-scholarisation, and a difficult labour market economy. As such, their future orientations seem to be quite uncertain, contestable and mixed between hopes and fears; and pathways marked by both resources and challenges. This paper presents data on the future orientation of emerging adults in Cameroon, collected with the Hopes and Fears Questionnaire among 137 university students. Content analyses of the qualitative data show orientation towards diverse future identities: hopes for schooling or continuing education, marriage and family formation, work and career development, and so on. Among others, they also fear not continuing their education, losing sponsorship, becoming poor, becoming unemployed, not getting married and having children of their own, and so on. Of great significance to this paper is the fact that young people's future orientation towards a dependable, functional and productive future in Cameroon is more or less a collective than an individualistic project. When they were asked if there were any resources or challenges in their way to adulthood, they reported the need for partnerships, networks and lasting social support systems as resources and which they fear to lose. In particular, they pointed to family support, supportive peer relations, community support programmes like scholarships for continuing education, opportunities for professional training and employment and national agencies for productive youth development. These findings are consistent with the culturally accepted collective pattern of growing up African, where "self-focus" is less emphasised than "other-focus". And future orientation research has shown that it is not just about where one wants to get and the way he/she ought to go, but also about destinations one fears to reach and pathways he/she should avoid. We maintain that the way to go is through collective efforts, with young people looking up to others in forming dependable identities; and transitioning into functional and productive futures.

Keywords: Social support, Future orientation, Emerging adult.

INTRODUCTION

The situation of young people in Africa is deplorable as their vision for adulthood is ill-fated by difficult economic, social, political, cultural, health and psychological conditions which have left most of them hopeless about the future of their adulthood. Individual and collective support efforts through health care services, economic resources, and social services appear to be unevenly distributed. As a result a majority of Africa's youth are left languishing in abject poverty, unemployment, under-scholarisation, difficult labour market transitions and general difficulties planning and managing transition opportunities and challenges. The implication is that it is increasingly difficult to manage issues of becoming autonomous, financially independent, personally and socially responsible, emotionally stable and self-reliant in future. As a result, several changes have occurred in youth life course. For example, education has extended into the late twenties and early thirties, family formation has been

postponed, and many young people plan on remaining single and childless well into their thirties, if not indefinitely (Casper & Bianchi 2002). The transition to adult status has been transformed from a relatively clear-cut, linear pathway to a complex, fragmented and individualized process dependent on the ability of each young person to navigate his or her way through a set of landmark events (Lo-oh, 2011).

However, core role transitions such as education, entering the work force, exit from the parental home, marrying and becoming a parent (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Shanahan, 2000) remain outstanding as important criteria for investing in the young, transforming them into thinkers of the future and of course preparing the next generation. This suggests investing in the young as the new road to take in the developing world. Guaranteeing youth education, employment, emotional stability and family formation would mean effectively preparing the future of developing economies. This is particularly crucial now given the changes that have taken place in the last few decades, causing severe fragmentations in the life course, thereby affecting investments in next generations.

For example, in developing economies, a higher proportion of students completed high school in the 1990s than in the 1960s, and more students now enroll into university education, pushing forth the age of leaving school (Hayford & Furstenberg, 2008). Also the median age for marriage and first birth has risen steadily since 1970s (Casper & Bianchi, 2002). Again today, children are born before marriage; education and employment alternate; and jobs paying enough to support a family increasingly require more formal education. This is why young people accordingly remain in school longer to acquire the credentials they will need to support a family (Gaudet, 2007). This has extended education further into the late twenties in the northern industrialised economies; and into the thirties in southern emerging economies. The result is that most young people are taking longer to go through the full set of transitions into adult roles, and some are delaying marriage and parenthood indefinitely. This further leads to inadequate preparation for the future of adulthood, participation in development efforts and involvement in next generation agendas. It is therefore important for south-south economies to begin to invest in the young, building capacities and competencies in order to effectively prepare them to get into “old people’s shoes”.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on emerging adulthood have indicated comparative and contrastive definitions of adulthood across cultures as well as pathways to adulthood. They have sought to understand the criteria that are most important in signifying adult status; whether there are universally held pathways to adulthood or if these trajectories are cultural or context bound. These perspectives have led to yet another very imposing pattern emerging adulthood research focusing on the future orientation of the youth and raising concerns about young people’s self-perceived futures. Their construction of their future pathways results from negotiations between their personal needs and their interpretation of the values, socio-economic realities and developmental opportunities provided by their local environment (Seigner, 2009). By and large, each culture recognizes a time of passage from childhood to adulthood; and dictates prescribed patterns for responsible behaviour in the development project. These patterns become mechanisms for orienting and re-orienting young people towards their desired futures. Typical trajectories here are individualism and collectivism.

The basic individualistic and collectivistic pathways of people as either independent or interdependent lead to contrasting sets of values which accompany emerging adults to the

future of their adulthood. Basically, individualism leads to emphasis on a range of self-oriented values and skills that support independent living. These values include self-sufficiency, self-determination, self-advocacy, self-competence, self-direction, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-reliance, and self-responsibility. On the other hand, collectivism leads to emphasis on group-oriented values and skills that contribute to effectively filling roles within the family or other group. Instead of living independently or going away to college, the young adult may be expected to remain at home and fulfill roles within the family, or even if the move out of the family, they remain neatly linked to the family; and look up to it for survival.

In traditional collectivistic cultures, there is likely to be a social hierarchy based on gender, birth order, and/or age. Family elders may be highly respected, and they often have roles of authority with responsibility to make sure family members do what is best for the family rather than what is best for themselves as individuals. Elders may have final say about how far their children go in school, who they marry, or where they work. Decisions by authority figures in collectivist cultures are likely to be obeyed with less questioning than is typical in individualistic cultures. Again, people of high social status may be seen as holding important cultural and technological knowledge. It may be considered disrespectful for children to express their opinions to or ask many questions of their elders. Instead they may be expected to absorb and then reflect back the knowledge provided to them by their elders, who determine when youngsters are ready to learn. In individualistic cultures, it is more likely that children are encouraged to form and express opinions and to seek knowledge at a pace they self-determine.

Transition policies and practices in modern society typically assume that youth and their families give priority to individual-oriented outcomes such as self-determination, self-reliance, and independent living. However, not all youth and families share these values (Bui & Turnbull, 2003). Individualism leads to differences in how the boundaries between people are conceived, which, in turn, lead to differences between individualistic and collectivistic values (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The primary individualistic view is that there are sharp boundaries between people, with each person being a complete unit. In other words, people are considered to be independent. They are generally also thought to have rights and responsibilities that are more or less the same. A person's identity in an individualistic society tends to be based mainly on one's personal experiences-accomplishments, challenges, career, relationships with other people and so on (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). By contrast, the primary collectivistic view is that people are not separate units, but rather are part and parcel of a larger group (such as extended family, village, or tribe). In other words, people are interdependent. A person's identity in a collectivistic society tends to be based on one's roles and experiences within the group context. Where a person's preference falls on the collectivistic-individualistic continuum depends on his or her culture, socioeconomic status, and historical era. Interdependent values appear to be stronger among people living in conditions of scarcity and threat, because they depend more on each other for survival.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

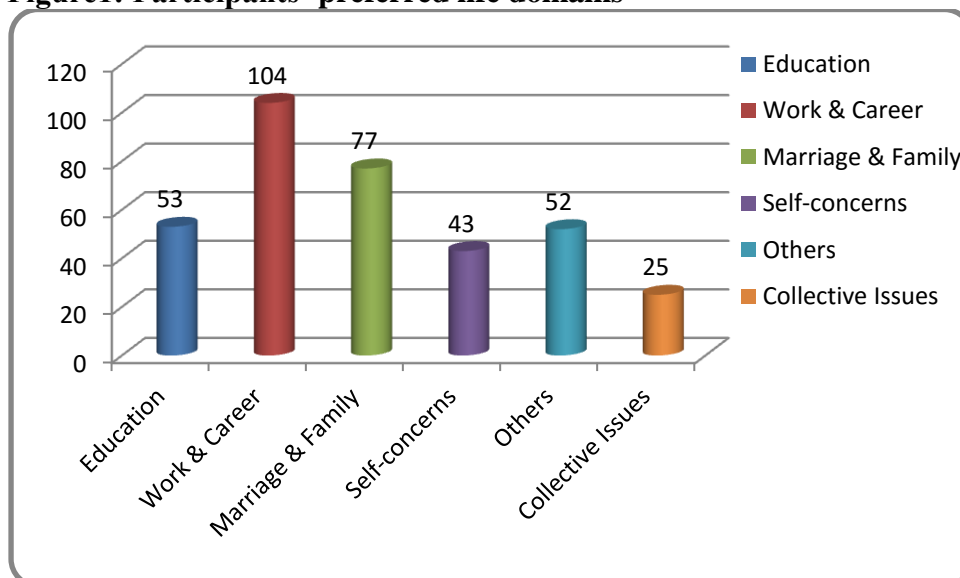
The sample of the study was 137 emerging adult university students, aged 18-30 and selected from two state universities in Cameroon. Out of the 137 participants, there were 103 (75.2%) females and 34 (24.8%) males. Majority of the participants was age 21-23 (40.1%), followed by 24-26 (35%), meanwhile, only 7 (5.1%) were in the youngest range 18-20. Majority of the

participants, 83 (80.6%) was selected from the Western grass fields of Cameroon; meanwhile 48 (35%) was selected from the Coastal Tropical Forest Peoples of Cameroon. Majority of participating students, 85 (63.9%), were third or final year university students and were closely followed by 33 (24.08%) fourth year university students. First and second year university students were only 8 (5.8%) and 11 (8%) of the sample respectively. In terms of marital status, majority of the sample, 115 (83.9%) reported they were never married, 16 (11.7%) were married and were currently in their first marriage, 4 (2.9%) were co-habiting while 2 (1.5%) were already divorced. The bulk of the sample was recruited from elitist family backgrounds, with parents, most of whom had at least gone through secondary school education.

Procedure

This research was part of a larger study that was aimed at investigating developmental trends, strategies and challenges that stand in the way to adulthood for emerging adults in Cameroon. While in the selected universities and taking cognizance of age, university students were conveniently and systematically selected for the study. The use of conveniently and systematically selected participants required the researcher to have access to particular types of participants who were especially likely to help in gaining an understanding of the phenomenon of thinking about the future of adulthood. Therefore, to ensure credibility and reliability of the quality of the sample, participants were first sorted demographically (in terms age), then further given the opportunity to understand the research idea, and finally, they willfully enlisted themselves as participants in the research. A brief discussion was conducted with volunteered participants to establish if they were actually conversant with the phenomenon of thinking and reflecting about the future of their adulthood; future orientations, their resources or careers to adulthood as well as their hopes and fears in their future orientation. At the end of the discussion with volunteered participants, and based on the researcher's discretion, students were recruited into the study.

The Hopes and Fears questionnaire (Seigner, 2009) was used to collect data on emerging adult future orientations. Two open-ended items on self-perceived resources as well as challenges in the transition to adulthood were also constructed to provide data on individualistic and collective pathways to adulthood. The Hopes and Fears questionnaire was analyzed descriptively according to content categories or life domains including orientations towards education, work and career, marriage and family, self-concerns, others and collective issues (Seigner, 2009). Frequency counts of mentions of a particular life domain as well as the particular hopes or fears attached to such a category were done and presented to determine the most popular future orientation life domain as well as typical hopes and fears. Open-ended items on self-perceived resources as well as challenges in the transition to adulthood were all coded into various themes or categories. But in this study, we report themes that were related to issues of individualism and collectivism which were identified as resources in the transition to adulthood.

RESULTS**Future orientation towards preferred life domains****Figure1: Participants' preferred life domains**

Content analyses of the qualitative data show orientation towards diverse future identities. For example:

At age 23 and in the second year of university studies, this female university student reports thus:

I hope for a successful educational career in future with qualifications that would enable me fit in in any career of my choice...; a good and well paid job that will enable me take proper care of myself and my family...; a loving husband who would take care of my emotional crises, physical needs and who can also care for our children... {By 28 Years}

At 22, a third year male university student reported:

I hope to further my education to the Masters level and afterwards get a good job that can sustain me and my family...; I also wish to become a responsible father and an influential person in my community and if possible my country...; I also hope to start up a family before or in my early thirties so I can start making my kids when I am still physically strong...I also hope to be financially capable of taking good care of my parents... {By 30 Years}

Meanwhile another first year female university student aged 21 reported thus:

I hope to have a better life in the future...; become very wealthy to command power and respect in my community...; attain the highest level of education...; climb to a high position of responsibility...and achieve my highest potential... {By 35 Years}

Another 24 year old third year university student who already had a two year old son reported thus:

...My biggest hope is to be well educated so that I can get a good job that would be my first husband; and if marriage would come, good. But if not, I will hold on to my job and concentrate on my younger siblings and my son {By 38 Years}

Others, though reporting hopes towards a future of work and career pointed vehemently to collective issues and concerns for “others” and maintained that self-concerns will only emanate when collective opportunities have been realized. A female participant aged 26 and in the second year of university maintained:

The hopes I have for the future are that in due time to come, Africa will become one (United Africa). In this way, many more job opportunities will be provided and most of {our} degree holders from universities and professional schools will be assured of a job and a reasonable salary after graduation... {By 36 Years}

Another student third year university student aged 22 said this:

I would like to grow up to be a responsible citizen to serve my nation loyally and also hold the post of Minister of State in the future...I should also have defended my PhD by then and also served in various positions of responsibility in and out of my country{By 38 Years}

Fears

Among others, they also fear not continuing their education, loosing sponsorship, becoming poor, becoming unemployed, not getting married and having children of their own, and so on. Some examples are highlighted in this section of the paper:

At 20, a 3rd year female university student expressed the following fears:

The country is unpredictable. One might get qualifications but may not be hired due to tribalism, favouritism, bribery and corruption...The ability to have money to pursue one's dreams is another fear for my future...

At 30, a first year male student feared that:

...if the present conditions in the country do not change, then the future will be characterize by high unemployment, poverty, ilhealth and many more people will prematurely die...

At 23, another female 3rd year university student expressed divergent fears. She noted as follows:

My deepest fear is not to be married by the age 30. I also fear that from the way things appear, men coming my way will not be serious...they will only want sexual relations and will not propose marriage. I also fear polygamous marriage...I am also afraid not to have a job by the age 30 as I will not be able to support myself and my family...I also fear for poverty which is already the talk of the day in Cameroon...

At 26, a male fourth year student said that:

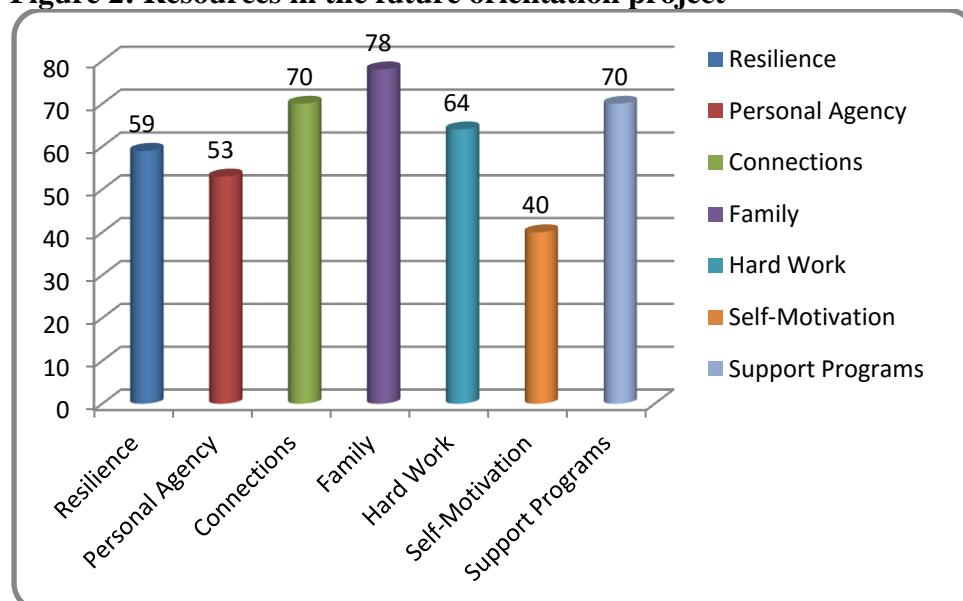
What I fear most is that I will not have a successful family life...My parents are separated and I fear that I may follow in my father's foot-steps. So I do not want to have my children with different women...I just want to have a woman that will understand me and that God will help me to cope with our differences...

At 23, a female student said:

I fear God should deny me with a job...I fear God should not let me down from continuing my education...I fear I should not have an aggressive husband who will not understand at all...I fear God should not deny me with children...

Collective identities in the future orientation of emerging adults

On the question of resources in the future orientation of emerging adults, findings pointed more to collective identities in the transition project. In particular, respondents reported the need for partnerships, networks and lasting social support systems as resources and which they fear to loose. In particular, they pointed to family support, supportive peer relations, community support programs like scholarships for continuing education, opportunities for professional training and employment and national agencies for productive youth development.

Figure 2: Resources in the future orientation project

Family support systems

Looking at family support systems as a basis for collective resource in future orientations, varied voices were collected which nevertheless showed high dependence on family support networks for success in adulthood. In many instances, respondents argued that they strongly depended on their family's support to be able to get to their dream futures. In this case most of their fears were centred on losing the support of family members, losing supportive family members and so on. They saw their parents as very dependable platforms from which to navigate their futures. Examples of such voices were:

My parents and entire family have been very supportive. I believe that I will still rely on them for my education and I will succeed in future only if they continue to assist me financially, morally and materially...However, I also need to put in my possible best... (A 23 year old female 3rd year student)

Firstly, I need money, advise and a sense that my family and close friends stand by me...If I am provided with my basic needs, I will in turn produce better results...Above all I need to be directed especially when I begin to stray away from my goal. I need moral support and love from my parents (A 20 year old female 2nd year student)

I will depend mostly on the love and support of my parents and elder brothers who are abroad. They have been very nice to me and I know if I continue to do well at school, they will also stand by me...My brothers have promised to sponsor my education up to any level I am able to go so what is important is that I pass in school (A 22 year old female 3rd year student)

My most cherished resource to adulthood is encouragement, love, support and motivation from my closest friends and relatives. I need my parents for financial and materials support to be able to continue in my education (A 25 year old female 3rd year student)

Supportive peer relations

Findings also pointed to the importance of collective and supportive peer relations in the future orientation of Cameroonian emerging adults. While a significant majority felt that family support was a unique resource for transitioning to productive adulthood, others identified with another collective mechanism, that of peer relations and connections. In this case, respondents looked up to friendships, quality relationships, emotional relationships, classmates and age mates, youth groups such as cultural groups, ex-student groups, various campus clubs, as well as role models, mentors, advisors, and so on.

I am in a very stable relationship now and I believe in three years or so I should be married...I will strongly need the support and love of my partner to make it in future since we are already planning our lives together. (A 26 year old female 4th year student)

While I want to study very hard to attain higher levels in education, I still need a caring, loving, available and understanding partner. Someone is like me and with whom I can share my experiences and pursue life goals together. This will help me not to go wayward from my dream...but I will avoid friends who indulge in drug abuse and prostitution that can lead to one contracting some deadly diseases (A 24 year old female 2nd year student)

Since I really want to represent my people in politics but I have not been going to the village, I am depending on associations that are preparing me...I am leader in some youth groups like our cultural association and my ex-student association. I am learning a lot there and I will use the skills there to move ahead (A 23 year old female 3rd year student)

I really depend on available models and mentors in my field of studies who could direct me through the good paths they themselves took to be what they are and where they are today (A 24 year old male 3rd year student)

I need good efficient and highly skilled lecturers and teachers who can properly direct me to a fruitful future...Government should also introduce youth programs that can join in supporting us to our desired future... (A 22 year old male 3rd year student)

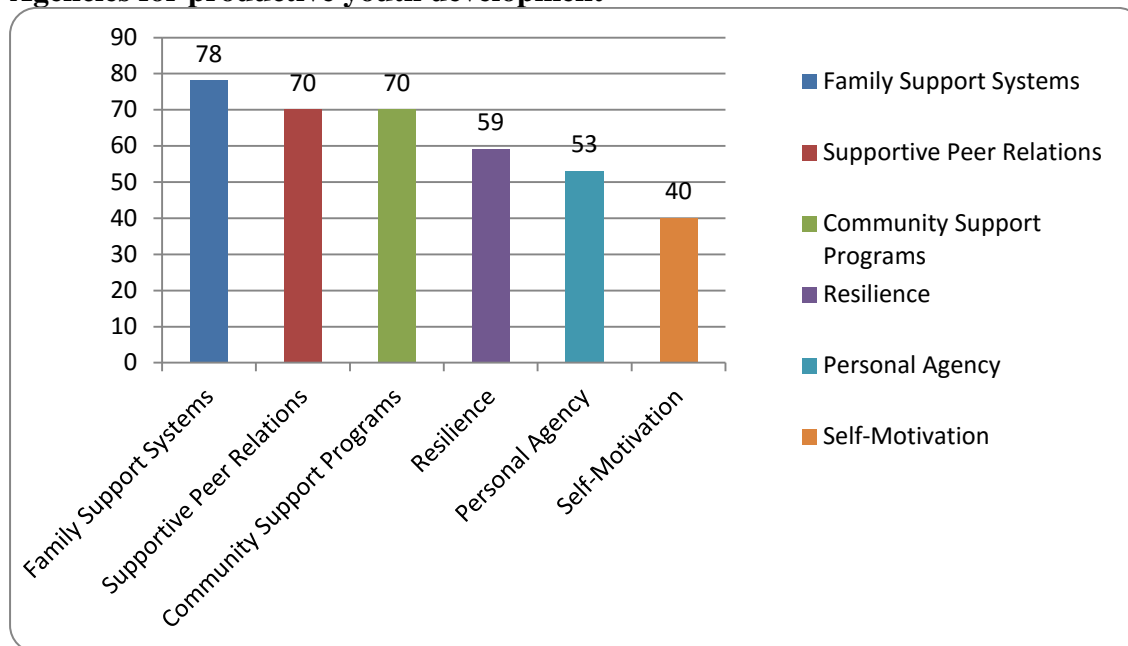
Community support programs

Key community support programs that were cited as important variables for productive future adulthood were scholarships for continuing education, opportunities for professional training and employment and national agencies for productive youth development.

...I strongly need the presence of good educational and vocational institutions in Cameroon through which I can actually acquire the required knowledge and skills for the job market. But it is often difficult to pass "concours" in this country so I will need support...(A 24 year old male 3rd year student)

I am hoping to apply for a scholarship to continue my education abroad. This is very important to me because I may not have the required means especially as my parents are no longer capable. That is why I need a good scholarship program to sponsor my education (A 22 year old male 3rd year student)

I have put my applications in the National Employment Fund and they say I should be checking...To get a job in this country now is very difficult and I do not even know where to go. That is why I applied through the National Employment Fund in Limbe. I am praying that something comes out of that... (A 25 year old male 4th year student)

Agencies for productive youth development**DISCUSSION****Diversity in the future identities of emerging adults**

Future identities were quite diverse in terms of hope for continuing education, engaging in marriage and family formation, work and career development, and so on among Cameroonian emerging adults. While they created multiple identities in these life domains, they also expressed significant fears in not continuing their education, losing sponsorship, becoming poor, becoming unemployed, not getting married and having children of their own and so on. These findings were quite comparable to Seigner (2009) who identified prospective future orientations towards education, work and career, marriage and family, self concerns, other concerns and collective issues. She added that young people are likely to construct future identities in accordance with the norms, values, beliefs and life conditions prevailing in their social community. This explains the diversity in future identities where emerging adults were caught between hope and fear for their experiences of the said life domains.

For example, while they hoped for “... a successful educational career in future with qualifications that would enable me fit in in any career of my choice...; a good and well paid job that will enable me take proper care of myself and my family...; a loving husband who would take care of my emotional crises, physical needs and who can also care for our children...”; they also feared for example because “The country is unpredictable. One might get qualifications but may not be hired due to tribalism, favouritism, bribery and corruption...” and because “...if the present conditions in the country do not change, then the future will be characterize by high unemployment, poverty, ilhealth and many more people will prematurely die...”.

In times of mass social change characterised by opening labour markets, increasing job insecurity, reduced job and training opportunities, and high rates of unemployment, a smooth and successful transition, void of fear becomes an important developmental task for today’s youth. This requires that the social and economic setting for growing up is made as

favourable as possible as to be able to promote hope and diffuse fears. This call becomes compelling for Cameroonian youth who experience high risks, with low levels of competencies and lower prospects for higher education training to empower their skills and ensure hope for successful entry into adulthood. Besides, schools in Cameroon have been critiqued for not serving society by insufficiently supporting the youth as a transition agency to adulthood (Lo-oh, 2012). Negotiating adulthood in situations where opportunity structures as well as control strategies are questionable, some how, leading to diverse future identities in which young people have to negotiate between hope and fear for their tomorrow, self-protection, support or total disengagement are most likely (Tomasik, Silbereisen, & Heckhausen, 2010). Usable structures are therefore necessary for supporting young people develop dependable and realistic future identities without want of doubt or fear.

Collective identities in the future orientation of emerging adults

Collective identities proofed that family support, supportive peer relations and connections as well as community support programs were more influential and resourceful than autonomous or individualistic identities such as resilience, personal agency, hard work and self-motivation in supporting transitioning youth into productive adulthood. This finding was comparable to Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen (2001) who found an equal balance between autonomy and community among American emerging adults. Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) also found that effective and dependable transitions to adulthood require a healthy balance between independence from family and connectedness with family and others. This suggests that others continue to be important to emerging adults and can become their major source of hope or fear of the future of tomorrow. In fact, Arnett (1998) suggested that the self-reliance during emerging adulthood actually includes an increased awareness of social and communal responsibilities. This justifies the important finding on supportive peer relations and connections in this study.

While the findings are at odds with previous studies which emphasized the ethic of individualism and self orientation in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 1998, 2000; Copen, Casper, & Silverstein, 2008), it conforms to several findings of emerging adulthood in the third world which emphasise collective effort (Nsamenang, 2007; Haidt et al., 1993). Findings here confirm that social support continues to be a very resourceful indicator for transitioning into productive adulthood; and even at that, previous findings have shown that social support is crucial for the development of autonomy and self-related identities (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). Seiffge-Krenke (2009) also found that emerging adults still living at home experienced substantially higher levels of parental and family support throughout adolescence. This is true of most African emerging adults whose transition period has been found to be much longer than in industrialized nations (Nsamenang, 2002; Lo-oh, 2012, Richter and Panday, 2006). Again, Schoeni & Ross (2005) found that as young people extend the transition to adulthood by delaying marriage and childbearing and expanding education, parents also extend their role in the lives of their children. Copen, Casper & Silverstein (2008) also found that collectivistic values are increased by the nature of demographic characteristics, suggesting that where full adult status is still determined by society-based markers, collective values than individualistic ones will be emphasized more. This is because others are seen to be very important in the acquisition of social roles as well as in negotiating societal, community and family life events.

These findings on increase in values of collectivism among Cameroonian emerging adults are also necessitated by the precarious conditions under which young people grow up. In

situations where growing up adult appears to be an arduous task necessitated by the very difficult economic, social, health and psychological conditions, leaving emerging adults hopeless about the future of their adulthood, individual effort naturally diminishes giving way to dependence on community or collective efforts. When young people live in quite vulnerable situations where health care services, economic resources, and social services are unevenly distributed and they languish in abject poverty, unemployment, under-education and a difficult labour market economy (Honwana & Boeck, 2005), social support networks become very incumbent. Black, Mraseck & Ballinger (2003) noted that the emotional climate, poverty situation, family composition, family work practices as well as neighbourhood and living environments are important variables for collectivist values.

In this regard, the family, peer group and community are seen to be a dependable source of social, economic and personal support. Schoeni & Ross (2005) confirmed this and maintained that as youth move into adulthood, families continue to influence their children's life chances and outcomes by providing social and employment connections, paying for college, and providing direct material support in the form of time, money, assistance, and shared housing. Increasingly, parents are called upon to provide direct monetary transfers or co-residential support to their emerging adult children in order to assist them in completing their schooling, beginning their careers, acquiring housing, and establishing families of their own (Cobb-Clark & Ribar, 2009). In fact, in most African cultures, like in those of Cameroon, families play a vital role in establishing families for their off-spring: they may arrange marriage, pay the bride price and above all young people marry into families and not individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

While social support and collectivist values have been shown to be very resourceful indicators for transitioning into productive adulthood among Cameroonian emerging adults, individualistic identities such as resilience, personal agency, hard work and self-motivation in supporting transitioning youth into productive life have also been shown to have some value. Based on this finding and on previous studies, while it is important to promote the collective values of togetherness in the transition to adulthood, it is also very important to strike an equal balance between individualistic and collectivistic identities. Besides Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) found that effective transitions to adulthood require a healthy balance between independence from and connectedness with family and others. This suggests that others continue to be important to emerging adults and can become their major source of hope or fear of the future of tomorrow. As such, others can be very important motivators to inspire young people to develop hopeful or fearful identities in their future orientations.

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