

FUNCTIONAL ASPECTS OF PRODUCTIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INDICATORS FOR ADULT MATURITY IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Developing societies, especially those of Africa, supported by development agencies are charged with preparing their youth for the next generation of adulthood. This trend is particular in Africa whose youth constitute more than 70% of its total population; and its future hope. With this, youth service providers in the continent are challenged to improve the delivery of services, youth participation, and involvement in the development project of themselves and their societies. Through such improvements, youth may receive skills that enable them effectively function and also become more psychologically prepared to embrace their futures. In support, youth agencies could also develop programs that reduce youth risk factors while simultaneously providing activities that promote the character, values, capacities, skills and employability of youth. When they begin to overcome risk factors and nurture protective and productive skills, capacities and interpersonal understanding, they gradually gain not only economic, social, and moral aptitudes but also become psychologically mature for adulthood. This article focuses on functional aspects of productive youth development and psychological indicators for adult maturity in Africa. A key argument is that a more skilled, functional and productive youth is more psychologically matured (and prepared) for adulthood than the less skilled and less productive youth. Attention is focused on a network of useful capacities, skills, competencies, beliefs, values, norms, and practices as productive elements that African youth nurture for adult participation. Meanwhile psychological indicators ensue from the productive skills and include among others, physical and emotional maturity, empathy, interpersonal understanding, and other developmental markers that keep the youth psychologically competent and ready for adulthood. The literature also insinuates that role transition markers, though less articulated in industrialized societies, are still very important for adult maturity in African societies. However, between these maturity indicators, there is observed evidence that the markers of adulthood are more complex, diverse and nonlinear today than they have been at any time period; and full adult status is given by an individual's ability to manage shifts and challenges standing on the road to adulthood.

Keywords: Functional aspects, Productive youth development, psychological indicators, Adult maturity.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is the world's youngest continent, as the proportion of youth among the region's total population is higher than in any other continent. In 2010, 70 percent of the region's population was under the age of 30, and slightly more than 20 per cent were young people between the ages of 15 to 24 (Ighobor, 2013; African Economic Outlook, 2012). Yet the socioeconomic conditions of young Africans have only improved in recent years, but not considerably. There has been an increase in school enrolment over the past 20 years, and the

gender gap in education has narrowed, however, in spite of these, young Africans continue to face major difficulties in the realms of higher education, employment, health, and participation in decision-making processes (Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege 2011; World Bank, 2014). They continue to be surest occupants of the margins of society, the silent or silenced subalterns who have little or no opportunities to speak or shift towards the centres of their society (Lo-oh, 2014). They are the Orient of their society, yet submerged in a tedium that valorizes gerontocracy at the expense of youth, who actually symbolize buds of hope and the future of the African continent.

Based on these, it is evident that African youth have the potential to be a great impetus for Africa's development, provided that appropriate investments in health and human capital are made (World Bank, 2014; African Union, 2011; Nsamenang, 2005). However, if youth development issues are not addressed, and if high rates of youth unemployment and under-employment, poverty and economic downsides and under-scholarisation persist, Africa's development could be negatively affected; with young people becoming more of a "ticking time bomb" than an opportunity for the continent (Ighobor, 2013). No doubt, common challenges including poverty, low levels of participation in national and local decision-making processes, poor infrastructure, and conflicts have led thousands of young people to migrate from rural to urban areas (Thorsen, 2014; Ofosu-Kusi, 2014; Kimpolo, 2014; Lo-oh, 2014). Many have crossed borders within Africa, and others have left the continent, in search of better educational and livelihood opportunities; many doing so under very harsh and risky conditions. Dissatisfied youth are often more likely than older generations to actively challenge their situation, and to become a socially destabilizing force, as evidenced by increasing demands for change in most countries in the African continent. For these reasons and many more, many African countries are now placing greater emphasis on youth development indicators. While strategies to improve the livelihoods of young Africans have already been put in place, with the youth population continuing to represent a sizeable proportion of the total population, better integrated and scaled-up initiatives on youth development are needed (Nsamenang, 2007). These could ensure improved health, education, and employment conditions, and also more effective participation in decision-making on issues that directly affect them, both in rural and urban settings.

Today's youth have aspirations to become active citizens and to contribute to their countries' development (Lo-oh, 2014). In this light, they call for more rights, more opportunities and for their voices to be heard. One critical factor to making the transition into productive adulthood is having the right skills and opportunities to access decent paid work (Bourdillon & Mutambwa, 2014). But in Africa, youths are three times more likely than adults to be out of a job; and for those who do have a job, they are typically underemployed, in their 20s and even up to the 30s, often in part-time or temporary work, and in the informal sectors usually in poor working conditions (Ighobor, 2013; Nsamenang, 2007). This youth unemployment and underemployment crisis imposes a heavy cost, both in terms of depletion of human and social capital and loss of opportunities for Africa's economic growth for present and future generations (ILO, 2012). True to say, globalization along with population growth increase the competition for education and employment, and, without appropriate interventions, social institutions and support opportunities, can lead to large inequalities for youth development. These inequalities can cause further disparities in access to education, healthcare, and jobs, creating a cycle that compromises the chances of productive development for many children and youth (Nsamenang, 2007; Currie 2011). However, just as there are inequalities in opportunities and resources that can accumulate and compound over the life course, there are

also individual differences in cognition, motivation and health that affect the degree to which young people are able to overcome disadvantages and develop resilience, agency and personal effort towards productive livelihoods.

Characteristics of African youth

Adolescents and young people represent the future of every society. Better education and public health measures can be hugely beneficial to their health and development (Lancet, 2012). For most adolescents and young people, this period of their lives is a time of enormous vibrancy, discovery, innovation and hope. Adolescence is also the time when puberty takes place, when many young people initiate their first romantic and sexual relationships, when risk-taking is heightened and 'fitting in' with peers becomes very important (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2002). It can also be a challenging time for young people, who are becoming aware of their sexual and reproductive rights and needs, and who rely on their families, peers, schools and health service providers for affirmation, advice, information and the skills to navigate the sometimes difficult transition to full adulthood (Arnett & Brody, 2008). This transition may catalyse a range of common challenges including HIV infection, other sexually transmissible infections (STIs), unintended pregnancy, poverty and economic hardships, low education attainment or dropping out of education and training. These problems may also be associated with a set of psychosocial problems that can impact negatively on the development and welfare of young people, particularly so, for young women (Nsamenang, 2002). While boys and young men gain rights and social power during the transition process, in contrast, girls and young women growing up in many African societies rather lose their rights and struggle to build the assets they need for later life (Tchombe & Lo-oh, 2012) as mature and productive women in their societies.

In a global context, sub-Saharan Africa remains the region that is most affected by malaria and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, despite positive signs that HIV/AIDS prevalence is declining overall among young people in the region (UNAIDS, 2011; Grassly & Timaeus, 2003). The high numbers of new infections among young people in Eastern and Southern Africa remain a serious concern, as it is a fact that the majority of adolescents and young people living with HIV/AIDS are growing in the same region. HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination-including attitudes based on laws and policies-continue to hamper the region's responses to the disease, by preventing young people from accessing a range of key sexual and reproductive health services (Grassly & Timaeus, 2003). Despite being the region with the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence among adolescents and young people, knowledge levels of the disease remain persistently low. Meanwhile many more young people continue to die of malaria and other emerging infectious diseases, hard to say, with apparent silence and no notice.

Common practices such as early sexual intercourse and child marriage in adolescent girls, age disparate and transactional sex, coupled with weak protective and sexual reproductive health systems, overall weak adolescent health services as well as high primary school dropout rates and low transition to secondary school, combine to create a daunting challenge on the rights to education and health of adolescents and young people in the region (Grassly & Timaeus, 2003). Youth unemployment and underemployment in Africa reflects this global situation but with the additional challenge of a youth population much higher than most other regions worldwide, weak national labour markets and persistently high levels of poverty and economic deprivation. The World Bank (2014) found that young people under 25 represent three-fifths of sub-Saharan Africa's unemployed population, and 72 percent of the youth population lives on less than \$2 a day. To help their families, 30 percent of children between

the ages of 5 and 14 are forced to work, which robs them of the educational opportunities that could break their families' cycles of intergenerational poverty (World Bank, 2014; Ighobor, 2013; African Economic Outlook, 2012; Bourdillon & Mutambwa, 2014).

An effective assessment of the well-being of the youth living in African countries requires good information on their characteristics-including size, gender composition, economic situation, health and socio-political makeup. Based on these, we observe that several African countries define their youth population differently. However, the African Union definition puts it at up to 35 years. This is seemingly too wide though very telling of African youth, because it is generally agreed that people in their 30s are adults, and hence not part of those youth who are in transition to adulthood. But this is not true of African young people. The very wide extension, up to the 30s and even more suggests how long the transition to adult status takes in Africa. Albeit all these, available data suggest that the youth population is large and growing, but there are limited data on gender and rural/urban distribution. It is generally accepted that youth constitute about 70 percent of Africa's population (e.g. Nsameng & Lo-oh, 2010). Thus, the absolute size of the continent's youth population is slightly above 200 million. Although Asia has the largest youth population in the world because of its large total population, Africa is the region with the highest youth population relative to its entire population (Nsameng & Lo-oh, 2010).

Because Africa's population is relatively young and has a high fertility rate, its youth population is projected to even grow very fast and is likely to remain high for a long period of time (Nsameng & Lo-oh, 2010). This youth bulge has consequences for the development of Africa. However, throughout the continent there are regional and country differences in the size of the youth populations and in the rates at which these populations are likely to grow with respect to development indicators. For example, the youth bulge is larger in North Africa than in sub-Saharan Africa, but the growth of the youth population is likely to be higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in North Africa because of differences in the dynamics of the populations across regions and countries (African Economic Outlook, 2012). Though the youth population is expected to reach a plateau in North Africa by 2030, in sub-Saharan Africa it is projected to grow in both absolute and relative terms until about 2050. There are differences in the rates of growth in the youth populations across countries as well. And though the relative sizes of the populations are expected to decrease in countries like Tunisia and Morocco by 2030, they are expected to continue to increase in countries like Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal and Zambia (Ighobor, 2013).

There are limited data on gender composition of the youth in Africa. However, if one assumes that the gender distribution of the youth population parallels that of the general population, then the youth population is composed of slightly more females than males. Similarly, there are limited data on the distribution of the youth population between rural and urban locations. But given the geographical distribution of the general population of Africa, a larger share of the continent's youth population resides in rural areas as opposed to urban areas and is more likely to be engaged in agricultural activities than in modern economic work sectors (Nsameng, 2002). In general, urban youth have better opportunities for education than their rural counterparts; and more males than females are exposed to better life opportunities, either in education, work or other development indicators. But observations suggest that African youth have high chances of being productive in varied spheres of life. A significant proportion of them are excelling in scholarship, science, technology, engineering, agro-industry and business. Youth, especially in North Africa and especially males, have high educational attainment. Data from Barro & Lee (2010) indicate that, on average, in Africa

youth have higher educational attainment rates than the continent's population as a whole. Similarly, youth have more education than the average person at every level of education, whether primary, secondary or tertiary. In addition, Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege (2011) and the World Bank (2000) have shown that tertiary education enrollment in African countries has more than doubled in the last decade. And although educational attainment by African youth has increased significantly in the last decade, the relevance of the curricula and the quality of education, in most cases, is not good (see Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege 2011). These challenges have implications for young people's employment prospects and their potential contribution to Africa's development.

Youth unemployment rates are relatively high, with significant regional differences and potential adverse consequences, such as poverty, disease and migration. The contribution of the relatively large youth population to Africa's development depends on the quality of human capital they possess, and crucially on whether they are gainfully employed as employees or have opportunities to establish their own businesses. Theoretically, an increase in the youth population will depress the real wage in an economy by increasing the labour supply, which in turn will increase employment, all things being equal. This, of course, may depend on the degree to which youth labour is complementary to, or substitutable for, existing (adult) labour or capital. Therefore, it is not clear whether an increased youth labour supply may lead to increases in aggregate employment and output. Because the contribution of youth to economic growth in Africa depends on whether or not they are employed, here we briefly discuss youth employment in Africa. This negative outlook of Africa and its youth presupposes enormous developmental challenges; and leaves African young people in danger of terrifying and bleak futures. Even though many Africans and their youth have braved these odds to still become successful and productive, many more continue to live a life in crises, less supported and without any glimpse of hope to the future. While we present the bleak reality of growing up in Africa, we equally make a case for strides that must be made by youth themselves and by significant others to facilitate transitions to productive adult futures. The essence is to help young people develop positively and productively towards acceptable indicators of adult maturity in general and in any given society.

The emergence of the positive youth development perspective

Early researchers on adolescent development started out with the wrong set of assumptions (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). Most, including the founder of the field, G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924), viewed adolescents in terms of what they lacked when compared to mature adults (Hall, 1904). For decades this perspective subtly influenced how researchers, teachers, parents, youth workers, and public policy makers looked at this period of development (Lerner, Lerner & Phelps, 2009). This perspective influenced what these significant others thought they could expect from young people, and how they would interpret what young people said and did. Based on these, and on the negative perspectives of adolescence, researchers and clinicians viewed adolescence as a time of storm and stress, when emotional turmoil was a necessary step toward maturity (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). It has been well documented that the transitional life stage of adolescence can be a difficult time for significant numbers of young people. Indeed, the international literature is replete with studies documenting a major concern with juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse and teenage violence (e.g. Caputo 1995; Gottlieb 2000; Lo-oh. 2014; Santrock, 2005). Constructing adolescence as a time of storm and stress, turmoil and trouble, however, serves only to stigmatise and promote negative perceptions of adolescents and their families and does little to help solve the problems of young people (Santrock, 2005).

This negative frame of reference, however, shifted in the early 1990s as growing numbers of researchers began to view adolescence through the lens of systems theories that look at development throughout the life span as a product of relations between individuals and their world (Lerner, 2005). One key aspect of this new focus was plasticity: the potential that individuals have for systematic change throughout life. This potential is critically important because it says that adolescents' trajectories are not fixed and can be significantly influenced by factors within themselves and in their homes, schools, and communities (Lerner, 2006). Despite the many problems often seen during adolescence—drug and alcohol use and abuse, unsafe sex and pregnancy, school failure and dropping out, crime and delinquency, depression and self-destructive behaviors—most young people do not usually have a stormy adolescence (Lerner, 2005). Most often, especially in deprived circumstances, there are intentional efforts and social support systems that help deprived youth overcome challenges in their way and proceed with life in more positive and productive ways. Similarly, while young people spend much more time with their peers than with their parents and may, sometimes, openly challenge their parents' actions and beliefs, they value their relationships with their parents tremendously. They also tend to incorporate their parents' core values in such areas as social justice, spirituality, and the importance of education into their own values (Lerner, 2006). Indeed, most adolescents select friends in part because they share these core values and similar perceptions of the world. In the light of these, they tend to adopt and benefit from a series of principles of positive youth development to navigate and negotiate their lives and futures in productive and life fulfilling ways.

The positive youth development (PYD) perspective refers to intentional efforts of youth themselves, adults, communities, government agencies, and schools to provide opportunities for young people to enhance their interests, skills, competencies and abilities (Damon, 2004). Positive youth development differs from other approaches to youth in that it rejects the dominant historical emphasis on trying to correct what is wrong with children's and youth's behaviour or development; and rather promotes efforts that seek to empathize with, educate, and engage young people in life fulfilling and productive ways and activities (Damon, 2004; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers & Lewin-Bizan, 2012). Originating from the ecological systems theory, positive youth development focuses on the strengths of adolescence and conceptually benefits significantly from positive psychology. Positive psychology is an approach to human functioning that addresses human flourishing and wellbeing and the factors that contribute to them (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2015). It lays emphasis on positive developmental trajectories, contexts that contribute to positive outcomes, and processes leading to such outcomes. Positive youth development developed from the dissatisfaction with a predominant view that underestimated the true capacities of young people by focusing on their risks and deficits rather than their developmental potentials and opportunities (e.g. Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas & Lerner, 2005; Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004). Rather than grounding its developmental approach in the presence of adversity, risk or challenge as did the traditional youth development approach, the positive youth development approach considers the potential and capacity of each individual youth. As such, the central argument is that if young people have mutual beneficial relations with the people and institutions of their social world, they will be on the way to a hopeful future marked by positive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). This approach posits that youth who have a sense of competence, confidence, connection to people and institutions, character and caring for others will in turn contribute to their own development, their families, communities and societies (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers & Lewin-Bizan, 2011).

Key indicators of positive youth development include the promotion of agency and resilience and the fostering of self-determination, self-efficacy, clear and positive identity and belief in the future; and the fostering of pro-social norms (Feierstein, 2011). In this conception, young people are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting. They are contributors to their life circumstances and not just products of them. To be agentic or resilient is to be able to intentionally influence one's functioning and life circumstances. In fact, it is about flourishing with the promotion of positive behaviours and the avoidance of negative ones (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2017). Bandura (2005) identified four core features of human agency. One of such features is intentionality. According to him, young people form intentions that include action plans and strategies for realizing them. The second feature involves the temporal extension of agency through forethought which includes more than future-directed plans and with which young people set themselves goals and anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate their efforts anticipatorily (Lo-oh & Busi, in press). A future cannot be a cause of current behaviour because it has no material existence. But by being represented cognitively in the present, visualized futures serve as current guides and motivators of behaviour.

On its part, resilience has been variously defined as positive developmental outcomes in the face of adversity or stress (Masten, 2001, Wyman, Cowen, Work, Hoyt-Meyers, Magnus, & Fagen, 1999); being relatively resistant to psychosocial risk experiences (Rutter, 1999), the successful adaptation or development of competence despite high-risk status or chronic stress (Egeland, Carlson, Sroufe, 1993) and the capacity of dynamic systems to withstand or recover from significant disturbances (Masten, 2001). While differing in terminology, such definitions describe the two common factors necessary for defining resilience; firstly the experience of adversity or stress, and secondly, the achievement of positive outcomes. Early research identified resilience as a characteristic of the individual and considered resilient children and youth to be exceptional individuals, unique in their ability to prevail against the odds (Anthony & Cohler, 1987). But current research predominantly views resilience as the process by which individuals draw on personal characteristics and resources in their environment to enable them successfully negotiate and navigate adversity (Masten, 2001). As such, resilience is not seen as a static characteristic of an individual, but rather a dynamic process across contexts and throughout the human life span.

Positive youth development researchers believe that the contexts in which young people live, learn, and play have resources to promote positive outcomes. The resources can become the "social nutrients" young people need for healthy development. Researchers and practitioners agree that the concept of developmental assets is key to understanding how to foster positive youth development in homes, classrooms, and community-based programs (Benson, 1997; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Productive youth development is consistently used to refer to at least three issues: the natural process of development, principles, and practices; which all combine to form a body of knowledge about productive and functional youth in context (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). From a natural process perspective, productive youth development has traditionally and is still most widely used to mean a natural process: the growing capacity of a young person to understand and act on the environment (Damon, 2004). Of course, human development is the natural unfolding of the potential inherent in the human organism in relation to the challenges and support of the physical and social environment. Development lasts as long as life. Optimal development in youth enables individuals to lead a healthy, satisfying, and productive life, as youth and later as adults, because they gain the competence to earn a living, to engage in civic activities and contribute to their society (Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004). Both heredity and environment influence this natural unfolding.

People can actively shape their own development through the choices they make and interpretations they place on their experiences.

According to Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman (2004), the youth development approach is rooted in a commitment to enabling all young people to thrive and flourish. This statement combines two principles: universality or inclusiveness (all youth) and a positive orientation, building on strengths (thriving or flourishing). As earlier seen, youth development arose as a counterbalance to the emphasis on problem prevention and treatment programs on categorizing youth according to their deficits and trying to remedy them (e.g. Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Peterson, 2009). The contrast between a youth development approach and approaches designed to prevent or treat specific kinds of problems among groups of youth identified as being at high risk is somewhat analogous to that between public health and medical treatment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). As in the health field, sharp debates and rivalries are often dulled in practice, where, in reality, a blend of both approaches is needed. If all youth are to thrive, some of them need prevention and treatment. As such the dual nature of the medical and social models of youth development cannot be overemphasized.

When the construct of positive youth development is further used as practices, it is often to describe a range of practices in programs, organizations, and initiatives (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Youth development in this sense refers to the application of the principles to a planned set of practices, or activities, that foster developmental processes in young people. The distinction between principles and practices is especially useful when considering the various settings or contexts in which young people spend time. Development takes place in families, neighborhoods, youth organizations, faith-based organizations, schools, and a multitude of other places, including cyberspaces. These youth development spaces need to be imbued with opportunities and frameworks that enhance positive and productive outcomes for youth as they transition through adolescence into full adulthood. Although the specific practices that adults use to create and sustain such needed opportunities differ across settings, the principles are consistent. Therefore adopting parenting, educational and developmental practices and principles that give opportunity to the youth, not only give them voice but also put them at the centre of their own development and as much as possible ensure flourishing than floundering, can only promote the positive and productive development of youth, making them more useful members of their societies.

Agency and resilience as drivers of productive development

Adolescence is often a stressful period during development because it involves a pivotal transition from childhood dependency to adulthood independence and self-sufficiency (Smith, Cowie, & Blades, 1998). One major challenge that adolescents encounter during their teenage years involves acquiring a sense of personal agency and resilient behaviours in order to overcome the burdens of a recalcitrant world. On the one hand, personal agency is about one's capability and capacity to originate and direct actions for given purposes. It is making intentional efforts, taking one's life and destiny into one's hands and above all becoming the agent of one's development and future (Lo-oh, 2017; Rutter, 1999). Personal agency, as a productive driver, is often influenced by the belief in one's effectiveness in performing specific tasks, which is termed self-efficacy, as well as by one's actual skills (Bandura, 1997). The onset of adolescence marks a profound shift in expectations regarding young people's ability to assume responsibility for their actions and functioning. Young people with a strong sense of efficacy for their development are more agentic, resilient and better able to resist the adverse influences in their development (Bandura, 2005). To overcome adversity, adolescents

and youth develop diverse self-regulatory skills, such as goal setting, self-monitoring, time management, and self-evaluation.

Among the mechanisms of human agency, none is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy. Self efficacy refers to subjective judgments of one's potentials and capacities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated life goals (Bandura, 1997; Rutter, 1999). This core belief is the foundation of human motivation, well-being, and accomplishments. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties and adversities (Bandura, 2005). Whatever other factors serve as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to effect change by one's actions. Again, belief in one's efficacy is a key personal resource in self-development, successful adaptation, and change. It operates through its impact on cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes. According to Bandura (2005) efficacy beliefs determine whether individuals think optimistically or pessimistically, in self-enhancing or self-debilitating ways. And such efficacious beliefs affect people's goals and aspirations, how well they motivate themselves, and their perseverance in the face of difficulties and adversity (Lo-oh & Busi, in press). Efficacy beliefs also shape people's outcome expectations—whether they expect their efforts to produce favourable outcomes or adverse ones. In addition, efficacy beliefs determine how environmental opportunities and impediments are viewed. People of low efficacy are easily convinced of the futility of effort in the face of difficulties and they quickly give up trying.

Meanwhile those of high efficacy view impediments as surmountable by self-development and perseverant effort. They maintain the course in the face of difficulties and remain resilient to adversity. With them, difficulties become opportunities or stepping stones towards positive, functional and productive adult futures. Efficacy beliefs also affect the quality of emotional life and vulnerability to stressful and depressive circumstances. They also determine the choices people make at important decisional points. A factor that influences choice behaviour can profoundly affect the life courses an individual takes. This is because the social influences operating in the selected environments continue to promote certain competencies, values, and lifestyles.

A more constructive analysis of the demands of adolescence also draws on the newly emerging literature on human resilience—defined as the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (e.g. Masten, 2001). Rather than adopting a deficit perspective on youth issues, resilience-focused research seeks to identify the positive factors in adolescents' lives that help them cope with the new developmental tasks required of them by society (Masten, 2007; Howard, Dryden & Johnson 1999). From this perspective, "problems" with adolescents are not so much located within the individual youth but within the social structures in which they are embedded. This perspective is congruent with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which views the individual as developing within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment. Therefore when young people have developmental problems, the reasons are rooted in society and its processes and not in them as earlier elaborated in the literature on adolescence.

In recent years there has been tremendous interest in understanding why some children grow up to be healthy and well-functioning adults despite having to overcome various forms of adversity in their lives. The phenomenon of successful and productive development under high-risk conditions is known as "resilience," and a great deal of research has been devoted to

identifying the protective factors and processes that might account for children's successful outcomes (Garmezy, 1985; Glantz & Johnson, 1999; Masten, 2001). Resilience refers to the ability of a person to successfully manage their life, and to successfully adapt to change and stressful events in healthy and constructive ways. It is about survivability and "bounce-back-ability" to life experiences. It refers to the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks.

The promotive factors that can help youth avoid the negative effects of risks may be either assets or resources (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Assets are the positive factors that reside within the individual, such as competence, coping skills, and self-efficacy. Resources are also positive factors that help youth overcome risk, but they are external to the individual. Resources may include parental support, adult monitoring and mentoring, or community organizations that promote positive youth development. The term resources emphasizes the fact that social environmental influences on adolescent health and development, helps place resilience theory in a more ecological context, and moves away from conceptualizations of resilience as a static, individual trait (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). It also stresses that external resources can be a focus of change to help adolescents face risks and prevent negative outcomes.

Psychological indicators of adult maturity in Africa

There are major developmental changes and challenges associated with the period of adolescence, as youth acquire and consolidate the competencies, attitudes, values, and social capital necessary to make a successful transition into full adult status (Arnett & Brody, 2008). According to Arnett (2000) and Gibbons & Ashdown (2006), late adolescence and the period following, that is emerging adulthood, have been noted as particularly important for setting the stage for continued development through the life span as individuals begin to make choices and engage in a variety of activities that are influential to the rest of their lives. As youth move into emerging adulthood around the age of eighteen (often on completion of high school), their choices and challenges shift to include decisions about education or vocational training, entry into and transitions within the labour market, moving out of the parental family home, and sometimes dating, marriage and parenthood (Henig, 2010; Heinz, 2001). Although early adolescence has received much attention by researchers as a period of major distress, recently late adolescence has become a period of more concern among developmental researchers and youth advocates

Demographic, sociocultural, and labour market changes have made the years between eighteen and twenty-five (and even up to the thirties in developing countries) more transitional than in the recent past. Thirty years ago, the period of adolescence was considered to end somewhere between ages eighteen and twenty-one, at which point youth would choose between a small, easily understood set of options following high school: youth chose to move into college, the labor market, or the military (in the United States) and got married and had children during their early twenties (Arnett, 2004, 2000; Côte, 2000), sometimes even earlier in African countries. These well defined pathways however, no longer exist for most social class groups, and for young people in virtually all regions of the world. This has increased complexity and heterogeneity in the passage into adulthood making the late adolescent years more challenging than in the past, especially for non-college-bound youth and members of several ethnic minority groups (Lo-oh, 2012; Lloyd, 2005). There are several shifts in transition processes so that pathways that were apparently superimposed in the yesteryears either no longer exist or do exist with inadvertent dynamism. Today,

emerging adults are more likely to be engaged in multiple processes all at once; some marry and begin to parent while still in school and out of the labour market; majority are most likely to have a child or children before marriage and while still dealing with school; a good number continue to live in their parental residential spaces well into their 30s, sometimes moving out and into it severally; and cohabitation has virtually become a characteristics measure for marriage among most young people.

The developmental tasks of adolescence that Erikson outlined as near measures of psychological maturity in adulthood include the development of a sense of mastery, identity, and intimacy. While these measures have been well articulated in decades of research in adolescence, others have added the establishment of autonomy, management of sexuality and intimacy, and finding a niche for oneself in education, marriage and work. Eccles & Gootman (2002) elaborated on these tasks, identifying several more specific indicators: shifts in relationship with parents from dependency and subordination to one that reflects the individual's increasing maturity and responsibilities in the family and the community; the exploration of new roles (both psychosocial and sexual); the experience of intimate relationships; identity formation at both social and personal levels; planning one's future and taking the necessary steps to pursue those plans; and acquiring the range of skills and values needed to make a successful transition into productive adulthood (including education, work, relationships, parenting, and citizenship).

By emerging adulthood, youth are increasingly independent, acquire and manage greater responsibility, and take on an active role in their own development. Eccles & Gootman (2002) go on to specify some primary indicators in this last stage of adolescence when youth begin to take on more demanding roles: the management of these demanding roles; identifying personal strengths and weaknesses and refining skills to coordinate and succeed in these roles; finding meaning and purpose in the roles acquired; and assessing and making necessary life changes and coping with these changes. Successful management of all these challenges depends on the psychosocial, physical, and cognitive assets of the individual; the social support systems available; and the developmental settings in which young people can explore and interact with these concerns.

Furthermore personal and community or social assets that may foster productive youth development may be linked to issues of individual physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional as well as social development. According to Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman (2004), aspects of productive youth development may physically refer to good health habits and good health risk management skills. Intellectually, young people ought to have knowledge of essential life skills, vocational skills, school success, rational habits of mind-critical thinking and reasoning skills, in-depth knowledge of more than one culture, good decision-making skills, and knowledge of skills needed to navigate through multiple cultural contexts. Social indicators of adult maturity are often seen to include connectedness, including perceived good relationships and trust with parents, peers (which may lead to dating and marriage) and some other adults; sense of being connected and valued by larger social networks; attachment to pro-social/conventional institutions, such as school, church, non-school youth programs; and commitment to civic engagement. Meanwhile psychological and emotional indicators for adult maturity have been defined by Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman (2004) as gaining the ability for good mental health, including positive self-regard; good emotional self-regulation skills; effective coping skills; good conflict resolution skills; mastery of motivation and positive achievement motivation for personal growth; confidence in one's personal efficacy; planning for the future and future life events; a sense of personal

autonomy and responsibility for self; optimism coupled with realism; a coherent and positive personal and social identity; pro-social and culturally sensitive values; a strong moral character; and commitment to good use of time.

Adulthood is the longest developmental period of the human lifespan. It includes the transition to a profession, the development of social and professional roles, the building of an active professional life, the formation of a family and the raising of children. Additionally, this period is associated with mentoring, wisdom, intergenerational relationships and the dismissal from or ending of one's professional life (Santröck, 2005). An understanding of the developmental principles, factors and characteristics involved in personality formation during different periods of adulthood is crucial for the development of social and psychological career development programs, family support programs, and psychological counselling and for the understanding of the mechanisms of human development. Some researchers have assumed that the main criterion of psychological maturity is personality self-determination, including the ability to act in relative freedom of the given conditions (both external and internal) or in spite of the conditions (Manukyan, Golovey & Strizhitskaya, 2015). Consistent with other researchers, we consider the psychological maturity of personality to be a more complex phenomenon consisting of several criteria.

In social and psychological sciences, adulthood is most often defined as a social category (praxeological perspective) and as a mental category/competence (anthropological perspective) (e.g. Czerka, 2007; Przystyczykowski, 2003). In different words, as Pichalski (2003) states, adulthood includes in itself the importance of both objective and subjective context. From the social or objective perspective, adulthood is referred to as a specific social state determined by the level of social expectations and tasks accomplishment of an individual. Getting the status of an adult depends therefore on the extent of fulfillment of well-defined societal or context-specific expectations (Piotrowski, 2010). Therefore, adulthood will be marked by such factors of maturity as: economic independence, carrying out family duties (father and mother's roles) or civil duties (Lo-oh, 2012). According to this understanding of adulthood, a person becomes an adult when he or she is able to go through the series of social standards which he or she meets in each stage of life. Thus, the objective dimension of adulthood refers to certain social standards ascribed to this stage of life and usually determined by age limits. In most African societies, maturity indicators will include finishing school, finding full-time employment, moving out of parental residence or even constructing one's own home, dating and entry into a long term relationship that would often end in marriage and the beginning of parenthood.

In the second conception of adulthood, attention is drawn to the necessity to free "adulthood" from any social convention (Przystyczykowski, 2003). This perspective assumes that adult status is not given by adult roles or social expectations, but by acquisition of mental and psychological competencies, for example, the increase of self-awareness and the adequacy of self-assessment. It is presumed that an individual reaches adulthood by achieving mental maturity (Czerka, 2007). In this light, young people's developmental paths are so much diversified that adulthood is much more often analyzed in the context of psychological characteristics and competencies, for example having a sense of responsibility, independence, self-reliance; and in the context of identity development or sense of adulthood in general (Lo-oh, 2012, 2009). In addition to these Arnett (2000) pointed to autonomy or independence, responsibility and emotional maturity; while Richter & Panday (2006) and many other sociological thinkers (e.g. Shanahan, 2000; Settersten, 2006) added the attainment of role transitions such as finishing school, finding a job, getting married and beginning parenting.

These range of indicators and developmental concerns between adolescence, emerging adulthood and full adulthood suggest that markers of adulthood have become more complex, diverse and nonlinear today than they have been at anytime period before. Productive transitions today are more subjective and psychological than objective and society-based with effective transitions marked by one's capacity to manage shifts and the bulk of challenges standing on the road to adulthood.

Maturity has different definitions across legal, social, religious, political, sexual, emotional, and intellectual contexts. The age or qualities assigned for each of these contexts are tied to culturally-significant indicators of independence that often vary as a result of social sentiments. In particular, adult development and maturity theories include the purpose of life concept, in which psychological maturity emphasizes a clear comprehension of life's purpose, directedness, and intentionality, which contribute to the feeling that life is meaningful and worth living (Adler, 1997). Although psychological maturity is specifically grounded in the autonomy and independence of one's decision-making ability, these outcomes are deeply embedded in not only cognition, but also in lifelong processes of emotional, social and moral development. In this light, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development describe progression into adult maturity, with each maturational stage characterized by a certain kind of psychosocial task or conflict (Erikson, 1968; Kemph, 1969). The "Identity" stage, which corresponds with adolescence and emerging adulthood is characterized by issues of identity and role exploration and role confusion, and also the exploration of sexual and other identities. In this wise, young people navigate a web of conflicting values and selves in order to emerge as "the person one has come to be" and "the person society expects one to become" (Wright, 1982). For the most part, therefore, psychological maturity is the ability of young people to stabilize themselves which include their capacity for socio-emotional gains and progression, independence, social adjustment, emotional stability and personality integration (Joy & Mathew, 2018).

While older persons are generally perceived as more mature and to possess greater credibility, psychological maturity is not often determined by one's age (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). However, for legal purposes, people are not considered psychologically mature enough to perform certain tasks such as driving, consenting to sex, signing a binding contract or making medical decisions until they have reached a certain age (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). The age of maturity, the most broadly applied legal threshold of adulthood, is typically characterized by recognition of control over oneself and one's actions and decisions (Arnett, 2000). According to developmental psychologists, most young adults aged 18 and over will move into adult roles and responsibilities and may learn a trade, work, and/or pursue higher education; fully understand abstract concepts and be aware of consequences and personal limitations; identify career goals and prepare to achieve them; secure their autonomy and build and test their decision making skills; and develop new skills, hobbies, and adult interests (Lo-oh, 2016; Huberman, 2002). Emotionally, most transitioning young people, 18 and above, will begin to move into adult relationships with their parents; see the peer group as less important as a determinant of behaviour; feel empathic; have greater intimacy skills; complete their values framework; carry some feelings of invincibility; and establish their body image (Lo-oh, 2012). And sexually, from age 18, young people may begin to enter into intimate sexual and emotional relationships; understand their own sexual orientation, although they may still experiment; understand sexuality as connected to commitment and planning for the future; shift their emphasis from self to others; and experience more intense sexuality (Huberman, 2002).

In a series of studies of Americans, Arnett (2004, 2000, 1998, 1997) identified several major domains of emerging adulthood. Biological or age-related attributes were identified as relevant to ascribing an adult status. These include among others reaching a certain age, the biological capacity to bear children, and growing to full height. Age-related attributes may also include passing societal age restrictions such as the legal age to obtain a driving license or to drink alcohol. Again, drawing from sociological observations (e.g. Hogan & Astone, 1986), role transitions such as marriage, independent residence, full-time employment, and parenting were also identified as possible criteria for the depiction of a person as an adult. In most traditional African societies, the adoption of these roles is identified as the major marker of achieving adulthood (Lo-oh, 2012, 2009; Richter & Panday, 2006; Schlegel & Barry, 1991). More to these, relevant family-related capacities such as marriage and parenthood have also been identified as maturity indicators of adulthood (Gilmore, 1990). These may include such capacities as providing for a family, protecting one's family, managing a household, and caring for children (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003). Brown, Moore & Bzostek (2004) also describe characteristics of young adults in relation to educational attainment and financial self-sufficiency, health behaviours, family formation, and civic involvement. Meanwhile other research consider the acquisition of the skills and attitudes needed to perform adult roles (e.g. Richter & Pandey, 2006) as important factors of adult maturity. More and more, these standards are increasingly becoming optional as nearly everyone is considered adult even without having taken these role transitions or attained the supposed adult age (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2009).

In addition, in most traditional African societies, biological and societal norms continue to dictate the on-set of adolescence and adulthood. For example, the socio-cultural dimension of adolescence is marked by a set of cultural norms and practices that govern the transition from childhood through adolescence to adulthood in African traditional societies (Tchombe & Lo-oh, 2012). Examples of such norms are initiation rites, rites of passage, marriage, changed ways of dressing, circumcision, cultural initiation schools, ritual expectations and ceremonies (Shumba & Seeco, 2007; Tchombe & Lo-oh, 2012; Araria, 2007). After performing these norms, the individual is regarded differently, now as an adult. Among the Setswana of Botswana, the individual transitions from boyhood to manhood, with certain privileges and responsibilities attached (Shumba & Seeco, 2007); and among the Kom of Cameroon, emerging adult males and females, for the first time, perform the "goat sacrifice" and the "corn flour sacrifice" respectively (Tchombe & Lo-oh, 2012) and will continue to do so throughout adulthood whenever there is need. These practices, including young people's hedonistic conceptions of life set them to think and regard the future of their adulthood in more positive and productive psychological terms.

Besides the biological and societal considerations of adult maturity, two psychological aspects have been described as well. The first has been described in the developmental literature as the culmination of the separation and individuation process (Arnett, 2001; Hoffman, 1984) involving the negotiation of a mature and equal stance in relation to parents and the capacity to make independent decisions and to care for oneself (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003). While the second psychological aspect focuses on emotional maturity with emphasis on the capacity to control impulses, the adoption of a broad and unselfish perspective, and the acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. This is evident in responsible, norm-abiding behaviour such as avoiding committing petty crimes, avoiding becoming drunk, avoiding profane and vulgar language (Lo-oh, 2016). However, by either of these standards, and based on their subjective assessment, many young people have not yet become fully adult because they are not ready or able to perform the full range of adult roles,

and they have not forged a stable identity of who they are and where they fit into in society (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McCloyd, Rumbaut & Settersten, 2003).

CONCLUSION

As seen therefore, the major adult transition for Africans is that young people achieve in life by being autonomous, self-reliant, responsible for self and others, self-sufficient, self-confident, independent and above all interdependent, collective and supportive to the well-being of their kin and community. And so they do not need to graduate from school, pick up jobs, get married, and have children before they are capable of doing these. They are begun to be nurtured right from childhood through traditional practices like hunting, fishing, farming, cooking and care giving towards responsible adult futures. Culturally, the African worldview conceives of the youth as growing out of childhood and poised for an adulthood that lies in the future (Araria, 2007; Nsamenang, 2002); and inextricably promising (Lo-oh, in press). Also conceived as a “way station” between social apprenticeship in childhood and full social integration in adulthood beginning with social entrée, a brief transitional period that marks the beginning of adult life (Nsamenang, 2002; Serpell, 1994), African young people are considered the bridge to Africa’s future and the hope of the continent; and as such largely seen in positive, functional and productive ways. As earlier seen, transitions before and during emerging adulthood are typically characterized by rituals, rites of passage, and initiations into diverse sacred societies (e.g. Tchombe & Lo-oh, 2012; Shumba & Seeco, 2007). These cultural practices are cultured to accompany the developing individual in productive ways, ensuring functional and productive development. Emerging adulthood is also a time when young people are taken away to learn the ways of adults, returning with the skills necessary to fulfil that role in their community.

It is therefore an enduring care-giving and parenting developmental task to grow children and youth in productive ways so that they not only become successful in life for themselves but also that they may become functional and productive members of their kin and community. While care-giving practices and social support systems must incarnate these goals, developing young people should also nurture intrinsic elements of positive and productive development such as personal agency and resilience as well as the fostering of self-determination, pro-social norms and achievement motivation. They should be cultured to make intentional efforts, take their lives and destinies into their own hands, and above all become the agents of their own development and futures (Lo-oh, 2017). Finally, and from a resilience perspective, young people, though growing up amidst a multitude of adversities, should be able to incarnate protective factors and use the developmental challenges standing on their way as “stepping stones” on which to bounce into successful and productive futures. They should be able to surmount the adversities and positively pursue their life courses in ways that make them flourish albeit the difficult life circumstances on their developmental pathway.

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