



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

CENTRE FOR  
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

**On the meaning of money for young adults from poor Black families in Khayelitsha, Cape Town – Conclusions from a case study**

John Spyropoulos

CSSR Working Paper No. 476

November 2023



Published by the Centre for Social Science Research  
University of Cape Town  
2023

<https://humanities.uct.ac.za/cssr>

This Working Paper can be downloaded from:  
<https://humanities.uct.ac.za/cssr/publication/wp-476>

ISBN: 978-1-77011-467-8

© Centre for Social Science Research, UCT, 2023

About the author:

John Spyropoulos is an independent urban planner and researcher  
based in Cape Town, South Africa.

# **On the meaning of money for young adults from poor Black families in Khayelitsha, Cape Town – Conclusions from a case study**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the subjective experience of money by a group of young adults from poor families in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. As a qualitative case study, it contributes to a gap in the scholarly literature on the values and practices of a category of township youth, young adults 25 to 35, on their earning, spending and contribution to household budgets, and the effects of these on social relations in the family households in which they reside or on which they depend, and on their status in their peer milieu.

The research contributes empirically to four themes: employment status in the quantitative labour market literature; the construct of aspiration and positional consumption among young adults as they transition to adulthood; domestic mutuality and financial interdependence, and the literature on life course transition and waithood; and finally, the involvement of external structural conditions and events such as the COVID pandemic in the Domestic Moral Economy (DME) and lifeworld of young adults.

The study shows that flux and uncertainty in employment and low wage earning, and the surprising, even paradoxical, voluntary quitting of employment without having another job to go to correspond with labour market churn and perceptions of an absence in economic mobility. The study participants expressed an anxiety about their economic standing that arose out of a thwarted or curtailed aspiration coupled to a material (monetary) and existential situation of depletion. Personal, individually interested aspirations compete with wider collective demands which are based on obligations, which refer back to deep kinship-based practices of mutual support. ‘The money is never enough’ to support the life to which the subjects aspire. But, through episodic displays of positional consumption, the young adults expressed a ‘capacity to aspire’, they

made visible a state of having money and spending it while ever conscious of personal sacrifice and impoverishment at home. In the young adults' experiences of the health and economic effects of the COVID pandemic in 2020 we see a situation where adult status emerges, with economically precarious adult responsibilities in their own households in 2021, from economically dependent adult responsibilities in the parental households in 2016. Employment and money earning remained a key factor, however, in fulfilment of obligations in their DME and thereby attainment of adult status.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on moral economy a South African case of the inseparability of the effects of external economic conditions grounded in South Africa's racialised capitalist political economy and longstanding values and practices of mutuality in the domestic domain of poor households. Produced at the intersection of economic and cultural factors, the moral economy in the domestic setting (the DME) takes shape as a matrix of obligations and entitlements and consumerist aspirations. Individual participants' decisions and practices of earning and spending, supported by the household, link the DME back into the capitalist market as high levels of churn and default on consumer finance debts. A further related contribution, to youth studies, is an instance of the progression of young adults to modes of precarious adulthood, framed by theories of 'waithood' and 'non-standard' transitions to adulthood – that is, delayed, interrupted and insecure transitions to social adulthood, within the frame of economically dependent domestic relations.

## **1. Introduction**

My study examined the subjective experience of a particular group of young adults who were willing to tell their stories about their experience of money — of earning it, contributing toward family household expenses and spending money on the things they 'want and need.' The empirical material and the basic reflections on earning and spending and responsibility to the family household where they reside belong to their own endeavours and aspirations. I tell, from my own social position and theoretical orientation, as a non-Xhosa speaking white male outsider, how I have understood what they said. I do this by drawing on selected works of sociological scholarship for ways of thinking about their words and their worlds.

The research contributes to a gap in the scholarly literature on the values and practices of a category of township youth, young adults, related to their earning and spending, and the effects of these on the social relations in the family households in which the young adults reside. These values and practices and their effects are viewed through the theoretical lens of the notion of Polanyian

‘embeddedness’ and of a moral economy in the domestic domain – the Domestic Moral Economy<sup>1</sup> (DME) (Gregory, 2012).

The research contributes empirically to four themes: employment status in the quantitative labour market literature; the construct of aspiration and positional consumption among young adults as they transition to adulthood; domestic mutuality and financial interdependence, and the literature on life course transition and waithood; and finally, the involvement of external structural events and conditions such as the COVID pandemic in the DME and the lifeworld of young adults. Theoretically, the thesis contributes to the literature on moral economy a South African case of the inseparability of the effects of external economic conditions grounded in South Africa’s racialised capitalist political economy, and longstanding values and practices of mutuality in the domestic domain of poor households.

Framed by the construct of moral economy, the thesis shows that relationships between the elite and the poor in South Africa are governed (from the point of view of the poor) by social and cultural values that predate and also structure the capitalist market, not unlike the situation described by Thompson in *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*. (Thompson, 1971)

Before summarising my core findings and conclusions, note that I concluded my research in 2021, in a very different context to that of 2015/16 when I conducted my core fieldwork. In the first half of 2021, South Africa was in the throes of managing a third wave of the COVID pandemic and COVID’s social and economic consequences. Fear, death and economic uncertainty were felt, not least in the social and economic setting of the young adults who took part in this study. No doubt some people were more vulnerable than others to the economic and social effects of the state’s sudden and unavoidable decision to shut down the economy and send the population home without income or resources.

2020 was a very difficult year for a substantial segment of the South African working population and their dependents. During the period of restriction of movement and economic activity, the most vulnerable were concentrated among the 63% of workers who were either not designated as essential workers or were unable to work from home.<sup>2</sup> More than 70% of this group is in the lower half of the earnings distribution (Kerr & Thornton, 2020). It was estimated, using

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘DME is that domain where profit and loss and virtue and vice form an inseparable whole; or, to use Polanyi’s (1944: Chapter 4) famous formulation, where the economy is embedded in kinship and other social relations’ (Gregory, 2012: 380).

<sup>2</sup> Mafolo, K. (2020, April 24). South Africa’s poorest workers are more likely to lose jobs, says data report. *Daily Maverick*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-24-south-africas-poorest-workers-are-more-likely-to-lose-jobs-says-data-report/#gsc.tab=0>

StatsSA's 2019 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Labour Force Survey data, that employment levels dropped by 60% during lockdown Level 5 which ran from the end of March to 1 May 2020 (Francis, Ramburuth-Hurt & Valodia, 2020). Casale and Shepherd (2020), using NIDS-CRAM data, found that women accounted for two million, or 67%, of the roughly three million who lost their jobs between February and April 2020. By October 2020, however, NIDS-CRAM Wave 3 data showed a substantial recovery following the easing of restrictions to Level 1 lockdown, with just over 2.1 million additional jobs recorded between June and October, shared almost equally in absolute terms between women and men (Espí, Leibbrandt & Ranchhod, 2020; Jain et al., 2020). Woman workers were affected most. It is worth noting that not all who were employed before the lockdown regained their jobs, generating a widespread disturbance in household finances of the poor (Espí, Leibbrandt & Ranchhod, 2020).

In the first part of this paper, I summarise and synthesise my findings thematically before offering some thoughts and speculation related to selected scholarly work, and concluding with a contribution to literature.

## **2. Reflections on the empirical findings**

Flux and uncertainty in employment and earning, and the surprising, even paradoxical, voluntary quitting of employment without having another job to go to correspond with labour market churn (Kerr, 2018) and perceptions of an absence in economic mobility. These perceptions correlate with dissatisfaction, quitting and a negative subjective well-being relative to actual standing in the income distribution (Posel & Casale, 2011). Their low-wage insecure employment made the study participants anxious about their economic standing relative to where they felt they should be, both domestically and socially among friends and peers. Overall, the respondents felt that not only was the money they earned not worth the effort of the work but that they never had enough to meet the obligations and demands of their situation. The anxiety they expressed thus arose out of a thwarted or curtailed aspiration and a material (numeric) and existential situation of depletion.

Flux and volatility in earning and household income not only led to a vulnerability to poverty but, psychologically, also to chronic uncertainty and emotional stress in the household. Personal, individually interested aspirations compete with group and wider collective demands which are based on obligations and refer back to deep kinship-based practices of mutual support. These practices result in an ongoing, day by day, week by week, depletion of individual personal resources. 'The money is never enough' to support the life to which the subjects aspire.

The research shows that, through ritualised displays of positional consumption, the young adults expressed a 'capacity to aspire.' In these episodic displays, they

made visible a state of having money and spending it, while being ever conscious of personal sacrifice and impoverishment at home. The young adults pursued positional spending as an expression of a lifestyle aspired to. For the household, provision by the young adults of ‘objects of aspiration’ (Appadurai, 2004: 68) — such as furniture and household appliances — speaks to a residual historical mutuality belonging to obligations and reciprocity of traditional kinship relations. Herein lies an explanation for why the young adults’ households accept their spending behaviour, despite deprivation at home.

The young adults’ experiences of the health and economic effects of the COVID pandemic and the course of their lives since 2016, together with evidence from the research at the end of 2015, permitted reflection on their transitions to adulthood. I observed a situation where adult status with economically precarious adult responsibilities in their own households in 2021 emerged from economically dependent adult responsibilities in the parental households in 2016. The process involved a normative self-perception among the participants of their provider status, as heads of household and primary caregivers independent of parental support in the DME. This self-perception was due to their social age and the physiological aging of their parents, especially among women in the group who carried the additional burden of childcare responsibilities. Employment and earning money remained a key factor, however, in fulfilment of obligations in their DME and therefore attainment of adult status.

### **3. Synthesis of core thematic findings and critique**

I offer some reflections on four core themes that crystallised and consolidated during the research and its writing within the frame of selected economic sociology literature. These closely related themes concern the effects of intermittent employment; the phenomenology of consumerist aspiration; the construct of domestic moral economy in the familial household; and the transition to adulthood of the young adults.

Analysis of these thematic findings as a whole may be framed thus: changeable employment status, low and variable wages and positional consumption aided by consumer credit, are metabolised in the demand sharing DME of the familial household and in the competitive realm of peer sociability. Palomera and Vetta, building on insights developed by Narotzky (2015), claim that:

... the structural inequalities generated by particular forms of capital accumulation — mediated by particular kinds of state regulation — are always *metabolized* through particular fields constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings and

practices. It is these fields that we call moral economies.  
(Palomera & Vetta, 2016: 414)

In this study's context, structural conditions are metabolized through the fields of the domestic household and the peer milieu of competitive sociability, where the young adults live out, as it were, the consequences of their forms of earning over which they have little control.

The DME, in metabolising the structural conditions, situates monetary exchanges in a set of relational acts by which monetary contributions embed generational and social reproductive themes that belong to both local and national-economic contexts. Across contexts, mutuality with personal earnings strongly inclines toward immediate kin. In this case, the demand sharing DME serves to characterise the uneasy embeddedness (Polanyi) of money (and indebtedness) as a structural economic feature in microsocial relations where everyone is almost inevitably indebted. The family household, whose earning and unearning members go in and out of a state of indebtedness, accommodates the young adults and supports them when unemployed. In this sense, they receive a temporary and conditional 'credit' from the household. As such, the household expects that the unemployed member will soon find another piece of work after which contributions will resume. Moreover, a common longer-term aspiration prevails for economic well-being and to be seen in the world as successful.

This subjective lived experience sketched out and reflected upon above is important to bring to light because of the 6.25 million South African young adults ('youth') counted as employed in 2015, nearly 3.2 million of whom would have been only intermittently employed, mainly earning low wages that fluctuate from job to job. Yet economic academic studies, and public and policy discourse, seldom refer to partial and occasional employment as a separate category of employment status, despite the specificity of its consequences in the lifeworlds of millions of people, predominantly young adults whose intermittent employment regularly leaves them with almost no money at all and dependent on household support. They are simply categorised as employed. I offer a critique here of the standard categories of employment status in official statistics, which in one way or another inform state policy and business-economic decisions.

The consequence of this assembly of employment sub-categories under the official employed category is that it obscures the actual employment conditions and therefore the income/expenditure conditions of millions of people. In addition, the subjective effects of churn remain poorly understood, if at all. It may be too readily assumed that 'the employed are okay', that they have, for example, access to retail and other credit and that their financial circumstances are manageable. Yet, as shown here, irregular partial employment poses



enormous challenges to the rational management of one's finances, and to maintaining self-respect as a member of a family and as a social peer. Never having quite enough money in a highly competitive social environment means the individual is always destabilised in relation with their aspirations to 'become someone'. The research suggests that irregular contract and casualised employment, including informal sector employment and domestic labour, deserves a status of its own in official statistics. It deserves this status especially because of the significance of its social and economic impact, not to speak of psychological stresses on the individual and the collective, including the myriad of anti-social behaviour involving disrespect for social norms and statutory laws which we do not touch on in this study.

Further, this study reveals that quantitative analysis of data from statistical sets merely allows a generalised understanding of economic life and social action. At best, the analysis of correlations and trends yields insights into structural relationships between economic and social factors. These abstractly conceived relations entail effects and meaning in the lived experience of everyday social life. We encounter a gap in the economic literature analysis, namely the dynamic lived or subjective dimension of employment and unemployment. We are, thus, directed toward asking what, in fact, makes up 'economic life.' Does 'the economy' simply reference the interplay of structural factors distant from social life, or might a useful way of thinking about economy lie in extending the term to incorporate the meaning of money in social being? While my study cannot fully address this question, it opens a rational debate on what is meant by 'the economy' and proposes an improved method of analysis of that phenomenon in the concept of moral economy.

The concept of aspiration has proved invaluable to understanding processes of constructing meaning around everyday uses of money in the given contexts. One set of aspirations related to education and employment, we claim, are inseparable from the aspirations to wealth and well-being. The term 'aspiration' also points to the symbolic aspect of the pursuit of fine clothes, cars and other lifestyle goods. These goods function as expressive signs of economic well-being and elevated social status in the lifeworld of my respondents. These goods are, thus, aspirational goods: aspiration to a better life signified through acquisition and display of consumer goods.

My study demonstrates a nexus of relational acts around aspiration and the pressure to conform to peer group and social expectations. From those in the study, we hear the sentiment of 'never having enough money' along with references to the experience of 'sacrifice' and acting 'as if' and being 'held back' or 'left behind'.

Based on the findings above I would like to add a speculative note on the historical politics and social experience of 'not enough'. It is not just that the

money is not enough (due to the confluence of factors analysed) but also that the whole historical situation carries within it a sense of ‘never enough’ and ‘not enough’, always lacking — not enough done that was supposed to have been done, which has been a continuous feature of European settlement since 1652. This syndrome of ‘not enough’ has contributed to the core social and cultural values and practices that govern the relationship between the poor and the elite in South Africa. In this regard, the quote below, from some highly provocative conversations with an interlocutor and friend, informed my thinking in the writing of this working paper:

To grasp the situation historically, through a political and historical anthropology, we imagine three continuities alongside each other. One: not enough labour; not enough discipline; not enough policing: **the labour population series**. Two: not enough land; not enough resources; not enough money, not being enough: **the extraction/resistance series**. Three: not enough difference from an imaginary genesis; two counterposing sides to an alleged inherent human/cultural difference: **the difference series**.

In terms of tracking the figure or trope of ‘not enough,’ we see how the three serial continuities interweave, depending for effect and operations on each other: in all its ruptured parts, this total structure producing and reproducing ‘not and never enough’ appears in the everyday field of practical action as sayings and doings. **Labour** (colonial category: more labour units required at so much each; not enough or too much labour); **extraction** (colonised category: experience of never enough money or resources; not enough work; not enough space; not enough education, not enough services, not enough truth; pushed back, held back); **difference** (anti-colonisation synthesis: difference conceived and regulated, imposed and policed, as anti-colonial experience; site of resistance of the not enough against the too much. (See Manganyi, 2019.)

The indeterminacy in the trope of ‘never enough,’ sketched out above, shows how ‘attainable’ and ‘unattainable’ are terms relative to an aspiration and its assumed targets and goals. Money and what money can buy — aspiration and object — arise together. This bears out the observations derived from phenomenology which was the subjective apprehension of my participants’ actions and routines about money and what money means. The individual drive to self-assertion and personal evolution (or ‘progress’) meets the participant in a world and business of production. While it may be argued that the ‘persistence’ of the ‘never enough’ is both a natural drive to grow and flourish (Goodchild, 2007) and a basic functionality of consumer capitalism, we are concerned here with the complexities of a situation. In the settings under consideration, we see how the individual is constantly chasing a perceived unrealisable goal: that of an aspirant future that is out of reach, unattainable or only momentarily reached.

The distance to the aspired-to life is shaped significantly by the availability of consumer credit. The massive rise in consumer credit has been central to the fulfilment of consumer aspirations as they play out in Khayelitsha and in similar low-income contexts in the country as a whole. Retail credit energises such aspiration, supporting and promoting the acquisition of the positional goods which serve as status markers. But the hallucination of credit as emancipatory steppingstones out of the purgatory of ‘never enough’ soon gets exposed for what it really is — treacherous quicksand sinking the aspirants into ever-deepening debt. Credit becomes unpayable, another stressor, another feature in the experience of never having enough, of being in perpetual thrall to the duality of wage labour and the commodity economy.

Returning to moral economy in the familial household, monetary and social exchanges in the household involve a reluctant but obligatory sharing by the individual with the household. Money is counted relationally in the household, both as contributions and as sharing and giving. The contributing individual has, by right, a portion for their own use. In this private-use space, financial debt accrued is personal. Outside of household payments/contributions, debt belongs to the private aspirant subject (see the YouTube skit on the conflict between aspiration and obligation).<sup>3</sup> But financial debt and indebtedness and the impact of (economic) labour market conditions are also generational, and the family household is debt’s carrier. Debt and indebtedness thus deplete both the individual and the household.

Overall, the family as a household, including members elsewhere in the country, carry the ‘poverty’ effects of irregular and low wage employment through flows of contributions and giving/sharing. Yet poverty, as a category of economic discourse and scientific statistical measure, veils the variety of uses, experiences and social meanings of money in everyday life. As a site of earnings, consumption and debt, the composite family household shows how lives are sustained when there is often not enough money (poverty) and obligations and desires compete. For the individuals, household expenditure is inseparable from that of sites of sociability where they meet their peers and cohorts. It would be reductionist to say the individuals stream their earnings into two contending sites — household obligation and peer aspirational consumption. Instead, we see contentions for personal space, for individual and collective advancement and for *more*, played out between them.

Five years after the initial fieldwork, three case participants are steadily employed but most are still earning precariously. All participants except one are independent heads of their own households, with aging parents at home or in the Eastern Cape, and with older children. As a result, they have achieved their own

---

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcxG\\_GY6cw&t=55s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcxG_GY6cw&t=55s)

versions of adulthood. These versions of adulthood relate to normative evaluations of care and adult domestic responsibilities and fulfilling these responsibilities involves earning and having money to spend. But this sample does not provide an adequate measure for comparison of employment stability or opportunity, especially in mid-2021, at what became the beginning of an economic crisis brought about by the COVID pandemic and subsequent events (in particular, the ‘assault’ on retail outlets in July 2021).<sup>4</sup>

The evidence from fieldwork in May 2021 indicates dissonance between ideas of standardised life-course trajectories, institutionalised in rules and laws and by normative markers of life-course stages, and real-life experience. Real life transitions involve gaps and breaks, overlaps and repeats, and sometimes reversals of what are standard and socially-recognised life-course stages. We see a ‘non-standard’ mode of being, i.e., the state of waithood (Honwana, 2012) among ‘youth’ persists chronologically for the younger adults. We see socially-recognised markers of adult domestic responsibility link functionally to more steady flows of income, but here, too, we find vulnerability in the familial domestic domain for most participants. Where the individual is an earning head of household, they remain subject to the extended family’s flux in income that constitutes their personal range of the moral economy. The participants remain subject to collective external events and internal subjective economic effects, whether these are due to the pandemic or an occurrence of a moment of violence.

## 4. Theoretical Contribution

According to Fred Block, in his introduction to Polanyi’s 2001 edition of *The Great Transformation*, embeddedness expresses the idea that ‘economy is not autonomous, as it must be in economic theory, but subordinated to politics, religion, and other social relations’ (Block, 1957: xxiv). Polanyi argued that the ‘disembedding’ of a fully self-regulating market from society was a futile utopian project. This is not to deny, however, an evident separation or disembeddedness of the capitalist market from society through commodification of ‘human beings and the natural environment’ (Block, 1957: xxv).

Here, as a contribution to the literature I offer a South African case demonstrating the effects in the domestic realm of notionally ‘disembedded’ market conditions, characteristic structural conditions of the South African political economy of low-wage insecure employment, and an assertive consumer retail sector. These effects manifest in the responses by the individual, that

---

<sup>4</sup>South African looters raid Durban warehouses as riots escalate. (2021, July 13). Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-african-looters-raid-durban-warehouses-riots-escalate-2021-07-13/>

impact on household social relations and demonstrate an inseparability of these conditions from the domestic moral economy. South African economic and sociological literature on household economy and sociology usually assumes this inseparability and takes it as self-evident.

Regarding the inseparability of external economic conditions from the domestic domain, according to Gudeman (2008), economies' tension, the dialectic between the market and domestic realms he speaks of, is 'shot through with practices and ideologies, competition and mutuality, with antagonism and mutuality ...' (p. 4). This description echoes the often tense multivalent dyadic relationships referred to in this study, constituting the moral balance between obligation and aspiration in the study participants' households. In this study, economic tension plays itself out in the domestic domain, in Gudeman's mutual economy between the individual and collective interest. In doing so, it exposes his notion of 'calculative reason' that emerges through repetitive transactions in the market realm and the values and practices of mutual support and survival of poor households.

Indeed, Palomera and Vetta posit that the concept of '... moral economy is simultaneously an approach that integrates the traditional objects of political economy (relations between capital, class and state) but goes further by anthropologically scrutinizing the particular ways in which they are always embedded [or metabolized – see quotation above]' (Palomera & Vetta, 2016: 415). In this formulation, the concept of moral economy serves to explain the overall effects of the relations of capitalist economic power on everyday (anthropological) human interactions.

While most scholarship views moral economy as largely exogenous to capitalism, I argue that in its specifically South African labour market and consumer finance configuration, capitalism embeds itself through its effects in the (domestic) moral economy. Values and practices in the household are, however, to some extent also exogenous to it, reflecting extra-capitalist social and cultural norms and values.

Moreover, produced at the intersection of economic and cultural factors, the moral economy in the domestic setting (the DME) takes shape as a matrix of obligations and entitlements and consumerist aspirations. Individual participants' decisions and practices of earning and spending, supported by the household, link the DME back into the capitalist market as high levels of churn, and default on consumer finance debts.

In the setting of the household, the 'means to material want satisfaction' (Polanyi, 1957: 243) involves 'contributions' of money from the young adults' earnings to the familial household. These contributions are 'special money' (Zelizer, 1989) in that each type of money is uniquely symbolic, personally meaningful, and socially and politically significant, as much as it has

transactional value both in the domestic context and in the market. Notably, while money transcends social class differences and is in a classical sense indifferent to class position (Zelizer, 1989), class determines its quantity and quality — that is, it determines economic means and cultural and moral meanings. In these terms, therefore, the subjective experience, expressed as a sentiment of ‘never enough,’ is logically of a social class or class segment. Thus, once again, the DME and the experience of money points to class relations and political economy, linking the experience of the young adults to the wider economic context of historic racialised capitalist economic relations.

Regarding the ‘moral’ in moral economy, Carrier (2017) shifts attention away from normative evaluative definitions ‘to look at economic transactions in terms of relationships and their histories’ (Carrier, 2017: 32) in the manner of Thompson (1971). Thompson points out that legitimate and illegitimate economic conditions (including those of classical and neoclassical economics) are embedded in moral and cultural notions about how a fair economy should function (Thompson, 1991). This raises the question of the participants’ normative assumptions as members of poor households in the current context given that ‘... poverty, inequality and precarity continue to exist alongside ever-growing “runaway profits, astronomical wealth and impressive technological capacity” without eliciting extensive outrage or political mobilization’ (Li, 2017: 1247, as cited in Fouksman, 2020: 288). Here we observe, in the study participants’ accounts, sentiments of frustration and anxiety at the experience of insecurity, interruption, delay, and even reversal of the life aspired to and of transition to adulthood that is subject to low wage irregular employment. From the point of view of these (poor) subjects, and others in their situation, the workings and conditions of the labour market benefit the privileged.

This study thus makes two contributions to scholarship. First, it adds a South African case to the economic and economic sociology literature on the subjective experience by young adults from poor households of money earned and spent, involving an entanglement of a complex of binaries, of social relationships predicated on social and cultural values related to money. Examples include relationships involving obligation and aspiration; provider status and the position of dependent recipients of board and lodging during episodes in and out of work; and relationships between the external effects of structural conditions and internal responses to earning and spending.

In this case study, young adults are ‘locked in’ a DME, in a tense material and ethical balance which is consequent, principally, on historically racialised South African capitalist relations characterised by structural insecurity of employment and low wage earning.

The second, related contribution, to youth studies, is an instance of the progression of young adults to adulthood. We look at theories of ‘non-standard’

transitions to adulthood – that is, delayed, interrupted and insecure transitions to social adulthood within the frame of economically dependent domestic relations. The progression, first, transits youth of school going age differentiated by contemporary youth identity and culture into those who suffer the ‘violence of dreams’ (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012: 32) and those who live ‘*ikasi* [of the township] style’ (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012: 22). Five to 10 years later this cohort of youth have become young adults, as described in this study, who experience an unstable, disrupted transition to adulthood characterised by economically dependent and precarious domestic responsibilities. The transition to adulthood is from a state of material and existential depletion, of the ‘unattainability’ of the life aspired to, in 2016, to an adult status involving an interplay between money earned and domestic obligation that is in tension with positional consumption (the DME). Outcomes of this transition to adulthood, in 2021, combine in four dynamic and changeable categories of employment status with heightened adult responsibilities toward family in the DME. These categories include: first, persistent economically-dependent responsibility; second, progression toward ‘economically-destitute responsibility’ characterised by separation from the DME; and third, progression to adulthood with economically-precarious responsibilities. In these cases, the risk of unemployment hangs heavily over responsibilities for children and family. The fourth category is a conventional transition to adulthood through more secure employment to economically-secure responsibility. Aspiration to wealth and social and economic mobility symbolised by the positional consumption described has fallen away or diminished.

In sum, therefore, the unique contribution from this study is its observation and articulation of the subjective effects of external economic and social conditions over time on individual actions of young adults and domestic social relations. These domestic relations and individual choices regarding earning and spending are changeable over time with the transition to adulthood. By drawing from the theoretical literature, we link these effects and responses to different scales, to market and mutual economy (Gudeman, 2008) and to what Palomera and Vetta refer to as ‘the traditional objects of political economy (relations between capital, class and state)’ to the way they are ‘metabolized’ (Palomera & Vetta, 2016: 415) in the DME. Most significantly, following Thompson (1971), we can conceptually link relations between the elite and poor in South Africa (from the point of view of the poor) to extra-capitalist values and practices that predate and also structure contemporary economic conditions.

In closing, the study suggests a number of practical considerations emerging from the research and writing process. First, demonstration of the intersection of money and social relations, in this case in the domain of the household, the DME, offers the potential for new insights into the lives of township youth. Second, those with temporary and casual employment and variable low wages

deserve focused attention in the measurement of and commentary on labour market statistics. Third, the category of ‘Youth’ should be reconsidered by both scholars and policy makers in light of social processes and conditions rather than in an age-segmented category for purposes of policy. Fourth, the intermittency of employment requires attention in the regulation of the South African labour market with the aim of stabilising the experience of employment. Fifth, the idea of productive work should be revisited and reconsidered in light of the emerging politics of the ‘rightful share’ as articulated in *Give A Man A Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Ferguson, 2015) and also by Denning (2016), Hann and Parry (2018) and Neilson (2015), especially given the effects of the COVID pandemic. Lastly, models for youth culture require urgent, creative attention with the aim of systematically supporting and giving value to positive, collaborative life-enhancing alternatives to drink and revelry and consumerist aspiration.



## References

- Appadurai, A. 2004. The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition. In Rao, V. & Walton, M. (eds) *Culture and public action* (Vol. 59). Stanford University Press. 62-63.
- Block, F. 1957. Introduction. In Polanyi, K. (ed.) *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origin of our time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Carrier, J.G. 2017. Moral economy: What's in a name. *Anthropological Theory*, 18(1), 18-35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499617735259>
- Casale, D. & Shepherd, D. 2020. *The gendered effects of the ongoing lockdown and school closures in South Africa: evidence from NIDS-CRAM Waves 1 and 2*. National Income Dynamics Study–Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey. DOI: <https://cramsurvey.org/reports>
- Denning, M. 2016. Wageless life. In Eckert, A. (ed.) *Global Histories of Work*. Oldenbourg: De Gruyter. 273-290.
- Espi, G., Leibbrandt, M. & Ranchhod, V. 2020. *The relationship between employment history and COVID-19 employment outcomes in South Africa*. National Income Dynamics Study–Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey.
- Ferguson, J. 2015. *Give a man a fish: reflections on the new politics of distribution*. Duke University Press.
- Fouksman, E. 2020. The moral economy of work: demanding jobs and deserving money in South Africa. *Economy and Society*, 49(2), 287-311. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2019.1690276>
- Francis, D., Ramburuth-Hurt, K. & Valodia, I. 2020. Estimates of employment in South Africa under the five-level lockdown framework. *Southern Centre for Inequality Studies Working Paper No. 4*. Johannesburg: Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Goodchild, P. 2007. *Theology of money*. London: SCM Press.
- Gregory, C. 2012. On money debt and morality: some reflections on the contribution of economic anthropology. *Social Anthropology*, 20(4), 380-396. DOI: <https://10.1111/j.1469-8676.2012.00225.x>
- Gudeman, S. 2008. *Economy's tension: the dialectics of community and market*. Berghahn Books.

Hann, C. & Parry, J. (eds) 2018. *Industrial labor on the margins of capitalism: precarity, class, and the neoliberal subject*. Max Planck Studies in Anthropology and Economy Vol. 4. Berghahn Books.

Honwana, A.M. 2012. *The time of youth: work, social change, and politics in Africa*. Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press.

Jain, R., Budlender, J., Zizzamia, R. & Bassier, I. 2020. The labor market and poverty impacts of Covid-19 in South Africa: an update with NIDS-CRAM Wave 2, 2020. *SALDRU Working Paper No. 272, Version 1*. Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town.

Kerr, A. 2018. Job flows, worker flows, and churning in South Africa. *The South African Journal of Economics*, S1, 141-166. DOI: [/doi.org/10.1111/saje.12168](https://doi.org/10.1111/saje.12168)

Kerr, A. & Thornton, A. 2020. Essential workers, working from home and job loss vulnerability in South Africa. *DataFirst Technical Paper No. 41*. Cape Town: DataFirst.

Manganyi, N.C. 2019. *Being black in the world*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Neilson, D. 2015. Class, precarity, and anxiety under neoliberal global capitalism: from denial to resistance. *Theory & Psychology*, 25(2), 184-201. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354315580607>

Palomera, J. & Vetta, T. 2016. Moral economy: rethinking a radical concept. *Anthropological Theory*, 16(4), 413-432. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499616678097>

Polanyi, K. 1957. The economy as instituted process. In Polanyi, K., Arensberg, C.M. & Pearson, H.W. (eds) *Trade and market in the early empires*, Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press. 243-270.

Posel, D. & Casale, D.M. 2011. Relative standing and subjective well-being in South Africa: the role of perceptions, expectations and income mobility. *Social Indicators Research*, 104(2), 195-223. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-010-9740-2>

Swartz, S., Harding, J.H. & De Lannoy, A. 2012. *Ikasi* style and the quiet violence of dreams: a critique of youth belonging in post-Apartheid South Africa. *Comparative Education*, 48(1), 27-40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.637761>

Thompson, E.P. 1971. The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. *Past & Present*, 50, 76-136. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/50.1.76>

Thompson, E.P. 1991. The moral economy reviewed. Chapter 5 in *Customs in common*. London: Merlin Press. 259-351.

Zelizer, V.A. 1989. The social meaning of money: 'Special Monies'. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(2), 342-377. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/229272>

# The Centre for Social Science Research

## Working Paper Series

### RECENT TITLES

Spyropoulos, J. 2023. *Transition to adulthood in the time of COVID*. CSSR Working Paper No. 475.

Spyropoulos, J. 2023. *Five Carvela shoes and a shack: the making of aspirational status*. CSSR Working Paper No. 474.

Spyropoulos, J. 2023. *Young Adult responses to fluctuating employment: household, dependence and mutuality*. CSSR Working Paper No. 473.

Spyropoulos, J. 2023. *Experience and meaning of unstable earning and low wages for young adults from poor families in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa*. CSSR Working Paper No. 472.

Kelly, J., Ornellas, A., Coakley, C., Jochim, J., Mangqalaza, H., Cluver, L., Zelmanovitz Axelrod, I., Sidloyi, L., Price, Y., Thabeng, M., Dipa, Y. & Toska, E. 2022. *Investing in our future: supporting pregnant and mother learners' return to school*. CSSR Working Paper No. 471.

Nattrass, N. (with le Cordier, N., Cornish, K., du Plooy, D., Langerman, F., Mayman, R., von Blottnitz, H., O'Riain, J., Singh, S., Woodgate, Z., second year biology students who helped with the wildlife survey, and students from the Green Campus Initiative) 2022. *Recycling, integrated pest management and protecting wildlife at UCT: a situational report for 2022*. CSSR Working Paper No. 470.

Zhou, S., Toska, E., Orkin, M., Haghigat, R., Rudgard, W., Van Staden, Q. & Cluver, L. 2022. *A data-driven approach to identify suspected TB cases among ALHIV in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa*. CSSR Working Paper No. 468.

Nattrass, N. 2022. *Waste, rodents and integrated pest management at UCT*. CSSR Working Paper No. 469.

le Cordier, N., Mayman, R., Mofokeng, R. & Nattrass, N. 2022. *Recycling at UCT: A brief history and situational report for 2021*. CSSR Working Paper No. 467.

---

## The Centre for Social Science Research

---

The Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR) is an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Cape Town dedicated to conducting and building capacity for systematic, policy-relevant social science research in South Africa, the region and across Africa. Substantively, the CSSR conducts research in the broad areas of development, poverty, public health, safety and violence, and social relationships and intimacy. The CSSR presently consists of the Adolescent Accelerators Research Hub (AARHub), the Safety and Violence Initiative (SaVI), and the Sustainable Societies Unit (SSU) as well as a small Directorate.

The **Sustainable Societies Unit (SSU)** explores the social and institutional dimensions of economic development and the interaction between human society and the natural world. Its current foci include agricultural practices, human-wildlife conflict, winners and losers in South Africa's growth path, and the impact of the climate crisis. The SSU collaborates with the University of Cape Town's *Khusela Ikamva* Sustainable Campus Project, assisting with research on recycling and integrated pest management. The **Adolescent Accelerators Research Hub** generates evidence on which development accelerators – alone and in synergy with each other – can support adolescents in Africa to reach multiple Sustainable Development Goals. The Accelerate Hub is a partnership between governments, international agencies, NGOs, donors, adolescents and academics in Africa, Europe and North America. The **Safety and Violence Initiative (SaVI)** contributes to understanding and responding to violence and promoting safety. Its current focus is on the roles of parents in promoting the safety of children and adolescents.

Methodologically, our research is empirical and problem-driven. We utilise both quantitative and qualitative strategies of data collection. CSSR projects are usually team-oriented, bringing together multiple local and international researchers, and offering post-graduate students significant opportunities for hands-on training by involving them in all stages of projects. Research findings are presented and discussed at regular weekly seminars and published as CSSR Working Papers. The CSSR works closely with other research institutes at the University of Cape Town – including the Institute for Democracy, Citizenship and Public Policy in Africa (IDCPPA) and the Institute for Communities and Wildlife (iCWild) – and elsewhere.

---