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# **Transition to adulthood in the time of COVID**

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# Transition to adulthood in the time of COVID

## Abstract

*This paper examines both the transition to adulthood, as perceived by a cohort of young adults of mixed gender from poor families in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa, and what brought about this transition. These changes became evident in the context of the COVID pandemic, five years after the initial research in 2016.*

*Changed domestic responsibilities intersect with trajectories of variable and changing employment statuses to manifest four versions of adult status within domestic moral economies. Some participants attain regular employment, and transition to an economically-secure domestic responsibility. Others, mostly the women participants, continue to take economically-precarious responsibility reliant on contract employment. Others exemplify economically-dependent responsibility, and the fourth version of adult status exemplifies the risks of their precarious lives. This study reaches a normative conclusion that social science scholarship should characterise this age cohort not by chronological age but by categories of economic status and intensified adult responsibility in the domestic domain.*

*This paper contributes to youth studies an instance of the progression of young adults to a state of adulthood experienced as a 'non-standard', unstable transition from a state of material and existential depletion, of 'unattainability' of the life aspired to, to an adult status involving an interplay between money earned and domestic obligation that is in tension with positional consumption. This paper further contributes to scholarly work on domestic moral economy a conceptualisation of its internal temporal dynamic. The dynamic involves the flow of parallel life courses and intersecting relations of obligation and aspiration over time between age cohorts involving money.*

# 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on changes in the lives of young adults from poor families in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa. These changes became evident five years after the initial research in 2016, in the context of the COVID pandemic. The paper examines the process of the case participants' transition to what they perceive as adulthood — the point at which decisions and behaviours around earning and spending change — and what brought about this transition.

In 2020, hunger, unemployment, flux and financial insecurity accompanied illness and death in public discourse and private experience in South African households. The economic literature on the impact of the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, has calculated and tracked employment and churn, investigated the impact of loss of earning on mental health and on children and hunger. It has also examined the economic impact on men and women differently, and on informal trade and risk, and several other areas of concern. However, there is little in this literature that addresses the subjective, lived experience of the pandemic, or its effect, on the transition of a group of young adults to adulthood that this case study affords.

Accounts of the young adults in this paper, read together with their younger biographies in 2016<sup>1</sup>, reveal their changed social roles as providers in the domestic domain and newfound status as heads of household, as well as their changed attitudes toward excessive drinking and revelry. We see in the 2016 biographies how life path trajectories and prevailing external circumstances of the labour market, along with health effects of the pandemic in 2021, have shaped these changes. Their biographies trace pathways of transition to adulthood involving delay, interruption and impermanence, and, sometimes, repetition or reversals. Along these pathways, through small and large historic life course events and with aging and consequent changes in household demographics, comes a change in the domestic moral economy (DME). Equally, there is little scholarly work that examines the relationship between employment status (having or not having money) and the change of status and responsibilities in the domestic domain for young adults.

The concept of adulthood is understood in this paper phenomenologically, based on what the participants perceive is expected of them and what they expect of themselves. For these research participants, now in their mid-30s and older, adulthood involves, first and foremost, biological and sociological aging, including aging of parents and other household members. This leads to changed household demographics and the young adults feeling intensified financial

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<sup>1</sup>See

[https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/36723/thesis\\_hum\\_2022\\_spyropoulos%20john.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/36723/thesis_hum_2022_spyropoulos%20john.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

responsibility for their children. This is more evident among women and the men who have secure employment. The increased financial pressures of domestic responsibilities, and the financial and psychological effects of the pandemic combine to change attitudes toward excessive drinking and revelry. We find that the changed domestic responsibilities intersect with trajectories of variable and changing employment statuses to manifest four versions of adult status within domestic moral economies. These versions, playing themselves out in the domestic moral economy, both complicate and deepen the ways in which transitions to adulthood are viewed, i.e., the theoretical standpoints on youth transition.

The findings from my research in 2021 indicate normatively that social science scholarship should characterise this age cohort not by chronological age but by referring to categories of experience of economic status and adult responsibility in the domestic domain.

Following a brief look at the wider context of the effects of the COVID pandemic, this paper examines the evidence to distil key findings before assessing these in relation to the literature for a theoretical framework and a contribution to scholarship.

## **2. The wider context of impacts in the time of COVID**

The wider context of the research for this paper is the COVID pandemic and its destructive effects on the health and economic lives of the population, communities and families, and of the young adults in this study. The South African government contributed to the containment of the spread of the virus by promulgating regulations marked by five levels of severity of restriction. The rapid transmissibility of the virus, and administrative and social factors led to more than two million people becoming infected and probably millions more affected economically. The official COVID death toll exceeded 82,000 people as at the end of August 2021. The South African Medical Research Council's Burden of Disease Research Unit reported cumulative excess deaths of 244,846 in the period 3 May 2020 to 21 August 2021,<sup>2</sup> 85-95% of which are attributable to the Coronavirus.<sup>3</sup> There were two spikes in the number of infections and deaths, in July 2020 and January 2021, with a third spike emerging in July 2021.

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<sup>2</sup>South African Medical Research Council. Report on Weekly Deaths in South Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.samrc.ac.za/reports/report-weekly-deaths-south-africa>

<sup>3</sup>South African Medical Research Council. Correlation of Excess Deaths. Retrieved from <https://www.samrc.ac.za/sites/default/files/files/2021-03-03/CorrelationExcessDeaths.pdf>

The collection of papers in Spaul et al. (2020), using four waves of the National Income Dynamics Study–Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) survey data, highlight some wide-ranging effects of the pandemic. For example, nearly 50% of Black and Coloured households in South Africa ran out of money to buy food in 2020, and child hunger in January 2021 was nearly double pre-COVID levels, at 14% (Bridgman, Van der Berg, & Patel, 2020; Van der Berg, Zuze, & Bridgman, 2020).

Casale and Shepherd (2020) found that women lost 67% of the roughly three million jobs lost between February and April 2020. By October 2020, however, NIDS-CRAM Wave 3 data showed a substantial recovery with 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 et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2020). Fewer prime-age adults (25-40) were employed in October 2020 (60%) as compared with February 2020 (63%) (Espí et al., 2020). Of women employed in February 2020, 70% were still employed in January 2021, compared to 78% for men (Casale & Shepherd, 2020). There were also fewer women benefiting from the Unemployment Insurance Fund’s COVID-19 Temporary Employer-Employee Relief Scheme (COVID-19 TERS) in October 2020 (39%) than in June (41%). Similarly, 38% of the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRDG) recipients were women in June 2020 and 37% in October. In addition, 67% of women versus 25% of men said they were personally taking care of young children at home between end-April and June 2020. The comparable figures were 63% for women and 17% for men between July and August 2020. Childcare affects the labour market prospects of a greater number of women than men (Casale & Shepherd, 2020). Regarding movement, changing household demographics, and interdependency as a result of the pandemic, approximately 15% of those 18 years and older (five to six million people) moved into a different household during the first few months of the COVID lockdown (Casale & Shepherd, 2020).

There is also evidence of flux and churn in the labour market in this context of recovery in employment. Espí et al. (2020) show that, regardless of age and employment history, approximately half of those who lost their job in April 2020 were employed in October. While, about 30% of those who were unemployed in April were employed in October. Prime-age adults with a transient or mixed history of employment in the period between 2012 and 2017, that is, those that this study refers to as intermittently employed young adults, fared worse under lockdown (Espí et al., 2020). Prime-age adults with an intermittent employment history had an employment rate of 59% in October 2020 compared to 64% in February 2020 (Espí et al., 2020. See also Barnes et al., 2021; Mosomi et al., 2020; Schotte & Zizzamia, 2021).

Espi et al. (2021) emphasise the provisional status of their findings. Similarly, Casale and Shepherd (2020) are cautious about the reliability of the absolute numbers, given the small sample sizes (and therefore large margins of error). Noting this provisional status and in light of my own study of the experience of young adults of employment and earning, these trends merely serve to indicate an intensification of churn and employment insecurity for young adults (now prime-age adults), especially those who have a history of intermittent employment. The situation is worse for women than for men.

### **3. Evidence and findings**

Table 1 below provides an overview of the changes in the lives of each participant in 2021. The biographical narratives in the study informing this paper provide the material for the analysis that follows. Following a summary of the health effects of the ongoing pandemic on the lives of the participants, I summarise the evidence and analyse their statements regarding their responsibilities toward children and family, their attitudes toward drinking and revelry, and their experience of employment and livelihoods, before examining their thoughts on what constitutes adulthood.

#### **3.1. On the COVID pandemic - 2020**

The COVID pandemic is a significant and historic event but with a more or less familiar set of consequences in the course of the everyday lives of the research participants, with a few exceptions. Tembeka and her family became seriously ill. She was hospitalised in the intensive care unit and survived. Zintle's 66 year-old mother in the Eastern Cape had all the symptoms. She, too, became ill and survived. The virus did not infect anyone else in Zintle's family, but she knows two people in her community who died of COVID-related complications. Zintle's friend lost her job because she was frequently absent from work to care for her husband who was very ill. Temba reports the loss of two work colleagues to COVID, and a friend who lost his mother in the Eastern Cape. We note, without surprise, the widespread awareness of COVID infection and of death in the population. The attitude toward the pandemic was of generalised care and concern but mostly of anxiety regarding its personal economic effects.

**Table 1: Transition to adulthood (Women)**

	<b>Zintle</b>	<b>Buhle</b>	<b>Funeka</b>	<b>Lulama</b>	<b>Nobomi</b>	<b>Tembeka</b>
Age in 2021	42	39	30	31	37	35
Number of children	2 children, 1 grandchild	1	1	1	1	2
Marital status and responsibility for children	Unmarried. In 2016 she had a daughter in College and a son of 12. In 2021 Zintle cares for her daughter and grandchild, 2 nieces and her occasionally employed alcoholic brother.	Unmarried. Buhle has a 16 year-old daughter.	Unmarried. Funeka has one child who was 6 in 2016.	Unmarried. Lulama cares for her child who was born after 2016. She cares for and meets the shortfall of her mother's expenses.	Unmarried. Nobomi has had a child since 2016.	Unmarried. She had one child in 2016. Tembeka currently has two children cared for by her mother in the Eastern Cape.
Parents	Mother moved to the Eastern Cape.	Single elderly mother lives in Khayelitsha with Buhle's daughter.	Father passed away. Funeka lives with elderly mother.	Lulama lives in her mother's home.	Parents returned to Eastern Cape.	Parents live in the Eastern Cape
Household status and financial responsibilities	Lives in her own house, which used to belong to her mother. Zintle is head of the household shared with her brother, 25 year-old daughter, grandchild and two nieces.	Head of her own household since she left her mother's home in late 2016.	Head of household, though her mother is largely financially self-sufficient with her government older persons' grant.	Her mother remains head of household or, alternatively, Lulama is notionally financially independent in her mother's home when employed.	She rents out her parent's house to tenants and sends her parents the money. She and her sister share a rental home. Her child and sister's two children live their grandparents. Nobomi sends her parents R1,000 per month for her child's upkeep.	Dependent on familial household and largely on shared household income.



	<b>Zintle</b>	<b>Buhle</b>	<b>Funeka</b>	<b>Lulama</b>	<b>Nobomi</b>	<b>Tembeka</b>
Employment and earning as at May 2021	Employed on renewable contract with a non-governmental organisation (NGO).	Buhle lost her short-term contract job due to the COVID lockdown and remained unemployed as at May 2021.	Had been steadily employed on contract with a good salary but lost her job during the COVID lockdown and, as at May 2021, remained unemployed.	Insecurely employed on contract since 2016. Employed as telephone operator at the time of interview in 2021.	Employed on contract with a construction project in her neighbourhood, as a community liaison officer.	Intermittently employed but mostly unemployed. Had a chicken growing business during the COVID lockdown but lost it due to illness.
Attitudes and behaviour regarding drinking and revelry	Does not drink or drinks occasionally. Drinking is wasteful behaviour of youth.	Drinking is youthful behaviour. But Buhle has never been a big drinker.	She spends less on enjoyment, she says, and more on food and medication. She continues to 'party'.	She is no longer party a girl [her words]. She no longer binge-drinks due to financial obligations and believes reckless drinking is youthful behaviour.	Excessive spending and drinking is not the behaviour of a responsible adult. It is a matter of moderation.	Excessive drinking is reckless behaviour of youth.
Respondents' comments about achieving adulthood	Adult since before 2016. But although she was financially independent and living in her own home, her children lived with their grandmother.	Adult since 2016 when she left her mother's home to live on her own. This is when she became independent of her mother financially and for accommodation.	Adulthood is a matter of maturity, she says, and entails 'the ability to adapt to certain situations'.	Responsibilities for care for children and financial risk have curtailed drinking and revelry characteristic of youth.	Adulthood is a mindset that accepts adult responsibilities for children and family. Signs of adulthood are visible in behaviour related to drink.	Adulthood is age-related and subject to social expectation. Achievement is dependent on an individual's response to circumstances.

*Table 1 (continued): Transition to adulthood (Men)*

	<b>Nomlanga</b>	<b>Temba</b>	<b>Sipho</b>	<b>Fezile</b>
Age in 2021	34	37	37	39
Number of children	2 (children living with Nomlanga)	3 (2 children living with Temba)	2 (children living with their mothers)	3 (children living with their mother)
Marital status and responsibility for children	Married since 2016. 1 child in 2016. Has since had a second child with same partner.	Married since 2016. 1 child in 2016, cared for by its mother elsewhere. 2 children with new partner (wife). Contributes financially for children when asked.	Unmarried. 2 children, both living elsewhere with their mothers.	Unmarried. 3 children that stay with their mother. No responsibility.
Parents	Mother living in her own home.	Elderly mother living in own home in Khayelitsha with Temba's youngest sister.	Passed away.	Stepfather passed away and elderly mother living with her youngest daughter.
Household status and financial responsibilities	Head of household and has all 'conventional' signifiers of adulthood – a house of his own, married and paid lobola to wife's family, living with wife and 2 children, owns a car and is financially indebted.	Head of household. Responsible for own household expenses and took on the paternal role of his father in his extended family, with associated responsibilities.	Lives in his own house and is head of household. Has been this way since 2016.	In 2016 Fezile lived in a shack in the backyard of his stepfather's house. He currently lives in a shack in an informal settlement.
Employment and earning as at May 2021	Has a regular (permanent) government job.	Regular employment at an NGO. Earns nearly three times his salary in 2016.	Informal trade during lockdown and now traditional community services.	Unemployed and selling insurance on commission door to door.
Attitudes and behaviour regarding drinking and revelry	Excess is wasteful and can lead to reckless behaviour.	Unaffordable given financial responsibilities and pandemic insecurity. Excessive drinking and partying is the behaviour of youth.	Drinks normally as in 2016. Not excessively.	Regards drinking negatively but is evidently an alcoholic.
Respondents' comments on achieving adulthood	He feels one is an adult at 25 but that adulthood is a mindset of responsibility as a parent, but at 25, he says, he was having fun – drinking, ladies. This was not a grown-up attitude.	He perceived himself as an adult since 2015 when he moved out of his mother's house to a caravan in her backyard – but he remained dependent on the household for accommodation security.	He has been an adult since before 2016 and has been financially independent and head of household in his own home.	Adult since 2004. Was financially independent and head of household from 2004 to 2010. He was (inter)dependent after 2010. Currently destitute.

## **3.2. Caring for children**

Two of the 12 participants had no children and two had more than two children to care for in 2016. In 2021, all of the participants interviewed had one or more children to care for. Notably, even though the government child support grants had increased,<sup>4</sup> the children in 2016 were now older and of school-going age, which involved higher costs of child maintenance and greater financial responsibility. In all cases mothers cared for their children. We note from the work of Budlender (2019) on the care burden on young people in 2008 and then 2017 that the burden increased sharply over the period and fell heavily on women in their mid- to late-20s. Eighteen percent were primary caregivers in households with a child of 6 to 17 years and 38% with a child younger than 6 years. This compared to 0% and 8% for men respectively (Budlender, 2019).

All of the women in this study in 2021 were primary caregivers in their household. Two of the men interviewed were married and lived with their wives and children and shared the care burden with their partners.

## **3.3. Aging and changed domestic responsibility**

In 2021, parents and siblings had aged both biologically and sociologically in that their roles and relationships in the household had changed. Nine of the 10 participants interviewed were now heads of household or the main providers in the households. They were all living in their own homes or, in two instances, in the parental home with their elderly mothers. Notwithstanding the temporary loss of employment or livelihood in four instances, due to the COVID lockdown, all nine participants were more financially self-dependent than they had been in 2016 as younger adults. Independent residence, however, does not necessarily signify consistent financial independence or provide a release from financial obligation in the DME.

In 2016, six of the 12 participants interviewed lived on their own as heads of their own households and were financially independent of household income. Zintle lived within walking distance of her mother's house where her children were accommodated. She contributed toward their care and accommodation. Siphon and Aphiwe lived in the house they had inherited from their deceased parents. Siphon depended on sisters when unemployed and Aphiwe received financial support from her steadily employed boyfriend. Temba was expected to play the provider role in his mother's household. In return, he was accommodated in a caravan in her yard as part of an unspoken exchange. Dumisa lived in an informal settlement with his life partner and their child. Buhle left her mother's house in 2016 due to

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<sup>4</sup>Child support grants available to caregivers for children up to 18 years of age since 2012 increased from R350 per month per child in 2015 to R460 per month per child in 2021.

disagreements about money, but her child remained under her mother's care. In 2016, the relationship of mutual support persisted within the extended familial moral economy even though financial security was precarious and, in the case of Fezile, reversible. Fezile was financially independent from the age of 22. For five years he lived in his own informal dwelling in the yard of his stepfather's house with the mother of his two children until his employment contract was terminated due to his drinking habits.

### **3.4. Drinking and revelry**

Three women out of seven interviewed in 2016 did not drink or only drank occasionally or in moderation. All of the men drank and partied in excess in 2016. In 2021, nearly all the participants identify excessive drinking, revelry and lifestyle spending as wasteful, and associate it with youthful, reckless behaviour or the behaviour of adults addicted to 'enjoying and partying'. The combination of intensified domestic financial responsibilities and financial and psychological economic effects of the COVID pandemic have influenced attitudes toward drinking and revelry among this group of adults. Lulama pointed out, however, that, 'Some adults drink and party heavily whether they do or do not have regular income'. She delinks drinking habits from affordability and as a marker of adulthood. Vellios and van Walbeek calculate that, in the population over the age of 15, alcohol consumption is highest among the White male population in South Africa while binge drinking is highest among the Black African male population, at 42.5% and 49.4 % respectively. Further, they found that alcohol consumption and binge drinking is highest in the age group 25 to 34 (Vellios & Van Walbeek, 2018, Table 2). The prevalence of excessive drinking seemingly declines with age, and this correlates with the attitudes of the participants in this study.

### **3.5. Employment, earning and the attainment of adulthood**

Two research participants have been regularly employed since 2016. A third participant, Nomlanga, secured regular employment more recently. He works for the government, and Temba and Zintle are employed by NGOs. The two men in this group are now both married; one has bought and the other has rented his own house. One bought a new car but is feeling financially vulnerable since his wife lost her job. They have each achieved the conventional markers of adult status. The pandemic lockdown enforced in March 2020 disrupted earnings and therefore the aspired-to adult status was attained in four instances (in one man and three women) out of 10 participants interviewed. A further three participants (two women) still earn precariously.

The experience and attitudes of the respondents to attainment of normative markers of adult status – to the transition to adulthood – indicates anxiety, delay

or interruption of plans, or an extension or reversal of a life stage. In 2016 they speak of ‘being held back’ or ‘left behind’ compared to others in their lifeworld as a result of their employment status (discussed in my [first working paper in this series](#)). In 2021, secure employment remains a key marker of progress toward the adult status aspired to. Having money enables planning for, if not always achieving long-term goals but, according to Tembeka, an adult makes do with money that is available to care for children and other people the individual is responsible for, such as parents, family and kin. Tembeka delinks the age and social responsibilities of adulthood from employment status. In the case participants’ comments, we see an interplay between earning and adult responsibility in the domestic domain.

It is noteworthy that six participants had already achieved certain markers of adulthood in 2016, such as living in their own homes or being head of their own households, but their financial independence was precarious. For example, Aphiwe, Buhle and Zintle (all women) were living in their own homes but remained dependent on a sibling or their parental home for the accommodation and care of children. While the men were not dependent on their parental home accommodation for the care of children, all six remained precariously employed. Their financial independence was precarious. We can say they had already attained economically precarious adult responsibility that was dependent or bound, in 2016, into the wider familial DME. In 2021, we find the four male participants in this group are less bound into the (geographically) extended familial moral economy.

The research in 2021 points clearly to the reliability of employment and earning as a consistent factor in the young adult participants’ transition to adulthood, i.e., in fulfilling the responsibilities of adult status they aspire to and must perform in their own households. We find that some participants attain regular employment, and transition to an economically-secure domestic responsibility. Others, mostly women in the group, continue to take economically-precarious responsibility reliant on contract employment: Their responsibilities have intensified despite economic insecurity. And others exemplify the risks of their precarious lives. Buhle contracted HIV and lost her job due to the COVID lockdown. Tembeka was hospitalised with COVID and lost her livelihood. Fezile exemplifies the risk of destitution fuelled by drinking and his violent disposition. He has lost his place in the DME.

In sum, we see that versions of adulthood arise incrementally as a progression from the mid-20s to 30s of this group. Adulthood progresses from an economically dependent status to an economically-precarious responsibility in the DME and, for those with regular employment, to an economically-secure responsibility. We observe that these statuses are subject to delays, interruptions and reversals by big events, such as the COVID pandemic, and due to the

decisions and behaviour of the young adults themselves. We thus see that money and intensified relationships of obligation and responsibility due to age and aging constitute a dynamic dyad in the DME of the participants in 2021. In 2016, the DME also involved youthful aspiration in this dyad, often characterised by excessive drinking and revelry, and positional consumption.

## **4. Waithood and transitions to adulthood – Toward a theoretical framework**

Here we examine the key findings in relation to scholarship on the life course transition from youth to adulthood.

According to Goldberg (2013), the literature on transition to adulthood in sub-Saharan Africa, as in industrial countries (Macmillan, 2005), has tended to focus on individual transition. A better understanding of the transition to adulthood requires an understanding of the timing and sequencing of multiple role transitions rather than single transitions (Amato et al., 2008). Goldberg (2013) traces such pathways to adulthood, by depicting the timing and sequencing of transitions across the domains of school, work, and family formation for youth between ages 15 and 22 in Cape Town to determine how family instability in childhood relates to young people's experience of the transition to adulthood (Goldberg, 2013).

Similarly, Lam and Seekings (2005) examined transitions to adulthood for Cape Town urban youth averaging 18 years of age, by looking at a number of dimensions, including sexual activity, childbearing, schooling, work, and living arrangements. They compared the transition experiences of the youth of three population groups, African, Coloured, and White, as 'each were subject to very different treatment under apartheid, differences which may continue to affect young people in the post-apartheid period' (Lam & Seekings, 2005: 3). The high level of unemployment and extreme levels of inequality were clearly evident in their results, and impacted on all of the patterns they observed. Equally, '...transitions in sexual activity, childbearing, and marriage also appear to show an impact of poor labour market outcomes for Africans' (Lam & Seekings, 2005: 11). Here once again we see scholarly work that examines multi-dimensional pathways that intersect in the process of transition from youth to adulthood.

Most scholarship of South Africa, however, concentrates on the effects of living conditions, or individual life course processes, or events, on the lives and transition to adulthood of adolescents or young adults in their 20s. Swartz et al. concentrate on early fertility and parenthood in the transition to adulthood (Swartz et al., 2018). Budlender traces changes in the burden of care-giving over the transition to adulthood of young women and men aged 15 to 19 in 2008, and then nine years later (Budlender, 2019). The journey to independent living and the resilience of women is analysed by van Breda and Hlungwani (2019) and youth

transition out of residential care is studied by Moodley et al. (2020). Van Lill and Bakker study the effects of unemployment on the transition to adulthood of South African graduates (Van Lill & Bakker, 2020). The literature on transition to adulthood also includes analysis in the context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa (Rutenberg et al., 2001) and the transition to manhood through initiation rites in traditional societies (Siweya et al., 2018).

There is little in the South African literature, however, that examines the subjective experience of the progression to adulthood of a group of young people in their 30s, with a focus on changes in their employment status over time intersecting with changed adult responsibilities in their domestic domain.

The review that follows focuses on the phenomenon of waithood (Honwana, 2012) among ‘youth’ in Africa, defined as the period of transition between childhood and adulthood. The concept of waithood juxtaposes perceptions of stasis among the case participants in their progression to adult status through aging<sup>5</sup> of themselves and their elderly parents. These perceptions impact on social roles and responsibilities in the domestic domain and on corresponding attitudes to drinking and revelry. The discontinuity in the experience of employment and earning is a key factor in the experience of waithood. I therefore review the literature on the effects of age and employment status as a marker in the process of transition from waithood to adulthood. I conclude with a synthesis and propose a contribution to scholarship.

## **4.1. Age and the markers of adulthood**

Honwana (2012) draws from in-depth interviews of young people in Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia between 2008 and 2011 to define waithood as an in-between state in terms of social expectations and responsibilities, rather than as an age category. She considers young people who have not yet been able to attain social adulthood, despite their age, as youth (Honwana, 2012; Honwana & De Boeck, 2005). Honwana understands waithood as a mode of being, of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1966) and making do (De Certeau, 1988), and of making a living precariously, without a clear future (Honwana, 2012). She notes that ‘On the one hand, young people are no longer children in need of care, but on the other, they are still unable to become independent adults’ (Honwana, 2014: 29). The term waithood suggests a period of time, a type of stasis during which young people are active, making do while struggling for progress toward conventional markers of adulthood.

This paper proposes that the advance of social adulthood commences before and goes beyond any age category or cohort of youth. We see social adulthood advance with the age of the young person. Social adulthood also advances steadily

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<sup>5</sup>Encompassing both physiological and psychological aging.

in increments, precariously, subject to big events, such as a pandemic, and structural changes in the labour market, and also subject to small events of the young person's own actions. I interpret my research participants' experience of waitthood as a fluid marker of adult status in itself, constituted of in-between versions of adulthood characterised by insecurity of earning and increasingly intensifying responsibilities associated with sociological aging in the domestic domain.

For the participants in this study, youth are those in their late teens or early 20s. They did not think of themselves as youth in 2016. Indeed, six of the 12 participants interviewed in 2016 resided in their own homes, either because their parents had passed away (in two cases) or because of over-crowding or inter-personal tensions in the parental home (in four cases). They were heads of their own households but earned intermittently and, as a result, had an economically precarious (inter)dependent relationship with the parental household.

In 2021 the case participants identified youth with what they consider reckless drinking and 'partying'. A colleague and interlocutor from Khayelitsha, himself an ethnic Xhosa, informed me that the population in Khayelitsha view drinking and revelry as normal for young people up to their late 20s. We see chronological age signalling normative, socially expected behaviour patterns. Another such example is traditional male circumcision, a cultural ritual marking the transition from the chronological age of boys into the sociological age of manhood (Siweya et al., 2018). Tembeka puts the matter this way:

Once one reaches a certain age, you are an adult. Whether the odds are for you or against you. Much like teenagerhood, once you have reached that stage, you cannot reverse or skip it, you are in it. Being an adult is not constituted by whether you can provide or not [or] whether you are independent or not, [or] whether you can reason rationally or not. There are no conditions but expectations. It is expected that an adult behaves in a certain way. It is expected of an adult to reach certain milestones in life...

Tembeka links chronological age to expectations of performance of social roles and responsibilities. We have noted that aging, particularly of the single women in this case, intensifies domestic (financial) responsibilities resulting from the additional cost of care for their children who are now of school-going age. Budlender (2019) corroborates the existence of the additional burden of care for children in the household, faced by women when they transition to adulthood. Moreover, the parents of the research subjects have aged physiologically, have passed away or have retired and moved to the Eastern Cape. Support from the DME has therefore weakened with the passing of time and aging of parents.



The United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development define the category of youth as the period of transition from childhood to adulthood between the ages of 15 and 24. The African Union<sup>6</sup> and the South African<sup>7</sup> government, on the other hand, recognise a longer transition and set the age category for youth at between the ages of 15 and 35. Standardised life course trajectories in modern industrial society comprise three main age categories or phases: education, childhood and dependence; adulthood and independence, associated with work; and rest for the aged (France, 2007). However, age divisions are complex and involve social position and power relations between age cohorts. According to Bourdieu, youth is ultimately a socially constructed category. He claims that ‘Talking about “the young” as a social unit ... with common interests, relating these interests to a biologically defined age is, in itself, an obvious manipulation’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 95). For Jean and John Comaroff, youth is the historical off-spring of modernity (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). Not only have age categories changed from one historical period to another, the category of youth has also acquired different meanings in different places at different times (Bayat & Herrera, 2010; Mintz, 2008; Nayak, 2016).

Social science scholarship in Africa has tended to define youth as a social category characterised by particular cultural views, roles, rights and responsibilities, rather than a particular age cohort (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Durham, 2000) and some have suggested a focus on social processes and on the unfolding of an individual’s life over time (Cole & Durham, 2007; Johnson-Hanks, 2002). The array of scholarship on the experience of youth, described and explained by Honwana (2012) as waithood, points in this direction. The findings from my research in 2021 indicate that social science scholarship should characterise this age cohort not by chronological age but by referring to categories of experience of economic status and adult responsibility in the domestic domain.

## 4.2. On economic status

We see from the research that markers of adulthood among the group of young adults in this study include financial independence and independent residence from the parents’ household. Material and existential benefits of regular employment represent the key normative markers of adulthood most participants aspire to. These include a home of their own, marriage, children, dressing well, a

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<sup>6</sup>African Union. (2006) African Youth Charter. Retrieved from <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-youth-charter>

<sup>7</sup>National Youth Development Agency Amendment Act, 2020. Retrieved from <http://www.nyda.gov.za/Portals/0/downloads/NYDA%20Amendment%20Bill%202020%20May%202021.pdf>

car, and the social and economic status that these material benefits confer (see Nomlanga's comment on this matter in a [previous working paper](#)).

In West Africa, *youthman* refers to people who have not been able to attain social adulthood despite their biological adulthood. According to Honwana, even men over 40 continue to be seen as youth because of their inability to secure a stable income, to live independently and to marry and form families (Honwana, 2014). According to Sommers, in Rwanda the transition to adulthood 'may last for extended periods, well into their thirties and even forties. Some never get out of it and remain permanently in the precarious and improvised life that waithood imposes' (Sommers, 2012). Honwana argues that 'waithood is becoming a more permanent state and, arguably, gradually replacing conventional adulthood' (Honwana, 2014: 38).

In West Africa, *liggey* refers to 'work' and is one of the most notable virtues. Work, too, is an important marker of adulthood because of the ability it engenders to provide for oneself (Honwana, 2014). Work, according to Honwana (2014), defines a person's sense of self-worth and status in the family, as in this case study. She reports that the idea of work and earning as a marker of adulthood prevails among youth in all four African countries that were part of her study (Honwana, 2014). In Sierra Leone, young men speak of their struggle to make ends meet as *straining* to '... construct and improve their social and economic situations ... and to build provisional livelihoods' (Finn & Oldfield, 2015: 32). The waithood is named: 'Young Mozambicans use the Portuguese term *desenrascar a vida* [eke out a living]; young Senegalese and Tunisians employ the French term *débrouillage* [making do]; and young South Africans speak about "just getting by"' (Honwana, 2014: 34).

In this study, from the biographies in 2016, I argue that waithood already constitutes a version of adulthood that anticipates and aspires to economic progress. In the meantime and in most instances, the individuals rely on support from their parents for accommodation and care of children, if not for financial support.

In 2016, those in my study wait for a 'proper job'. Aphiwe claims she cannot plan for the future because she is waiting to see if her employer will extend her contract. The young adults I spoke to aspired to upward economic mobility and social status but felt locked in a state of 'unattainability', and of material and existential depletion. They are not waiting for adulthood as such. The young men I spoke to aspire to a 'proper job', i.e., regular earning with which to plan a future, buy a car, have a house of their own, to pay *lobola* to be married and take care of their children. These are all aspirational signifiers or markers of adulthood in my study that are contingent on earning. A proper job, thus, constitutes an aspiration to a version of conventional, economically stable adulthood.

In 2021, the participants in this study no longer ‘wait’ for a proper job while getting by on household income and moving from job to job seeking a higher wage or more reliable conditions of employment, as they did in 2016. Instead, as heads of their own households with intensified domestic responsibilities toward care of children, with one exception, they can no longer be financially dependent on their parents’ households, regardless of employment status. Few are regularly employed; most hold on to their unreliable employment and all are subject to the effects of the major historical event of the COVID pandemic.

The in-between state of waithood is not just an African or developing nation phenomenon. As long as 20 years ago in the United States and the United Kingdom, terms such as ‘kidults’, ‘adultescents’ and ‘thresholders’ described youth in limbo between childhood and adulthood, or what some scholars referred to as ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2014; Molgat, 2007). In other instances, terms like ‘boomerang’ or ‘yo-yo’ generation refer to college graduates who return home and continue to depend on their parents. In Italy, *bamboccioni* [big dummy boys] is a term that refers to the growing number of young men in their mid-20s and -30s who are still unmarried and living with their parents (Honwana, 2014). The experience of waiting for adulthood is seemingly a global and enduring phenomenon.

### **4.3. Transition to adulthood**

I turn to the literature on life course transition in modern industrial societies for underlying structural features of this global phenomenon of waithood. Here we find a standard institutionalised life course pattern forming a key baseline.<sup>8</sup> According to Mayer and Müller, ‘Institutionalization of life courses refers to the process by which normative, legal or organizational rules define the social and temporal organization of human lives’ (Mayer & Müller, 1986: 32). This underlies what Honwana (2014) refers to as conventional adulthood. Examples of standard institutionalised life course markers would be, for example, eligibility for an older person’s grant, now at 60 for both women and men in South Africa, or the expectation of educational authorities in South Africa of completion of schooling by the age of 19.

In this case study, the standard institutionalised pattern that the young adults themselves hoped for, if not expected in their 20s, was to complete tertiary education followed shortly thereafter by secure employment and then by marriage and forming a nuclear or extended family. Their experience of transition to adulthood was, however, of an increasingly diverse sequence of life course markers. In this regard, Macmillan (2005) explains, referring to life course theory and scholarship in modern industrialised societies, that:

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<sup>8</sup>In the sense of forming a baseline against which to assess change.

... the idea that a life course that is structured in an orderly or normative manner has given way to some new and potentially problematic formations ... involve[s] the decompression of markers of adulthood, increased overlap of social roles, increased reversibility and instability of roles, and the decoupling of role trajectories over the life span. (Buchmann, 1989; Kohli, 1986; Shanahan, 2000, all in Macmillan, 2005: 4)

Further, ‘Short-term economic fluctuations and discreet historical events [such as the COVID pandemic, my addition] and, within age cohorts, social inequalities such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status have complicated the standardization and individualisation trend’ (Shanahan, 2000: 668). These disruptive external structural factors manifest an insecure, dynamic temporality of de-standardised youth transitions to adulthood, which are linked, in this study, to employment status and relationships of responsibilities in the domestic domain.

Mounting evidence of de-standardisation as far back as the 1980s led to various new conceptual models of life course transition, including the idea of non-linear transition (Furlong et al., 2006). Arnett proposed the concept of ‘emerging adulthood’ constituting a new life course stage (Arnett, 2014). Other theorists proposed that ‘arrested’ or ‘delayed’ transition to adulthood was becoming commonplace (Côté, 2000). Bengtson and Allen (2009) conclude that:

The life course perspective involves a contextual, processual, and dynamic approach to the study of change in the lives of individual family members over time, and of families as social units as they change over historical periods. It thus involves both the micro-social and the macro-social levels of analysis. (Bengtson & Allen, 2009: 492)

The work of Lam and Seekings, who report on transitions to adulthood for urban youth with an average age of 18 years in Cape Town, South Africa, provide a baseline of findings for reflection for this study (Lam & Seekings, 2005).

Against the analytical backdrop of a conventional, socially-recognised and largely institutionalised pattern of life course transition, my study revealed a differentiated, impermanent, diverse, and sometimes reversible lived experience of employment and earning. This experience contributed to a ‘non-standardised’ life course pattern with variable timeframes and overlapping life stages. Typically, it involved moving through school and then waiting to be employed while searching and doing short courses to improve their chances of employment, and this experience typically involved having a child young out of wedlock and then entering and leaving employment intermittently and earning variable wages for 10 years or more while waiting for a ‘proper job’ and adulthood.

In sum, from the biographical accounts of the study participants in 2016 and 2021, we see adulthood emerge from a precarious dependent transition into a changed but usually still precarious adulthood in their own DME. Emerging adulthood involves a normative self-perception among the participants of their role as provider, and as caregivers, in their DME. To be clear, the shift in attitude happens because of aging and the responsibilities this confers on women in particular, who carry the burden of childcare responsibilities. Employment and money earning, however, remain key conditions of this provider status in their household, i.e., key to their fulfilment of obligations in their DME and therefore their attainment of adult status.

## 5. Synthesis and contribution of the paper

In this paper, I have located the research theoretically within the study of transition of youth, as defined by the official age category of youth in South Africa, to adulthood. Analytically, according to Woodman and Bennett, youth studies is framed by two dominant theoretical strains (Woodman & Bennett, 2016). The first enquires into the patterns and temporality of life course transition. The second theoretical strain refers to youth sub-cultures of consumption of lifestyle goods, drinking and revelry. In 2021, we see adulthood emerge out of youthful forms of identity-making that involve extravagant consumption of lifestyle goods, including ‘reckless’ or carefree spending on drinking and revelry.

This paper contributes to youth studies an instance of the progression of young adults to a state of adulthood by looking at these two theoretical strains together within the frame of DME. First, in the work of Swartz et al. (2012) we observe youth differentiated in two of four categories of contemporary youth identity and culture, described as those who suffer the ‘violence of dreams’ (Swartz et al., 2012: 32) and those who live ‘*ikasi* [of the township] style’ (Swartz et al., 2012: 33). These ‘youths’ become young adults, as described in this study. The young adults, in turn, experience a ‘non-standard’, unstable transition to adulthood from a state of material and existential depletion, of ‘unattainability’ of the life aspired to, to an adult status involving an interplay between money earned and domestic obligation that is in tension with positional consumption (in the DME). Outcomes of this transition to adulthood in 2021 combine in four categories of employment status and heightened responsibilities toward family in the DME. Aspiration to wealth and social and economic mobility, symbolised by the positional consumption described, has fallen away or diminished.

This paper also contributes to scholarly work on domestic moral economy a conceptualisation of its internal temporal dynamic. The dynamic involves the flow of parallel life courses and intersecting relations of obligation and aspiration over time between age cohorts involving money. In other words, the dynamics related

to money and obligation and aspiration change with age, status and changing fortunes of individual household members. Adulthood thus emerges out of and coexists in the DME with extravagant spending of 'juvenile' aspirations. Aspiration and austerity thus stand opposite each other in the DME as in this skit: <https://youtu.be/5MLeo-iVF1A>.

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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.

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