

Life at a stop sign: Narrative plots of the Transition to Adulthood during Unemployment Amongst South African Graduates

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Abstract

Compared to older cohorts, emerging adults are more susceptible to unemployment as they enter the labor market. In the context of increasing higher education access, an unstable economic climate is leaving a growing number of South African graduates unemployed. After the exploration that is typically part of higher education, unemployment could influence emerging adult graduates' ability to make adult commitments. The aim of the current study was to gain both a detailed and a holistic perception of the developmental impact of unemployment during the transition to adulthood. A sample of 12 participants were recruited to partake in individual interviews. A narrative analysis revealed six common plotlines of progression and regression as the participants approached the goals they had set to achieve as adults. The findings illustrate the inability to accomplish adult commitments as a contributing factor in explaining the decrease in subjective well-being associated with unemployment specific to emerging adults.

Keywords

unemployment, graduates, adult commitments, narrative, South Africa

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

Emerging adulthood can be regarded as a period of time between adolescence and entry into lasting adult roles and many versions of this life stage is possible when considering cultural and social class differences (Arnett, 2011). While emerging adulthood offers time for exploration, a prolonged transition to adult commitments is not necessarily pleasant or an intentional choice for all emerging adults (Côtè, 2014; Côtè & Bynner, 2008).

Unemployment is an example of an unintended extension of the instability, uncertainty, and absence of adult responsibilities that is often associated with emerging adulthood. The World Bank (2020) defines the unemployed population as “those individuals without work, seeking work in a recent past period, and currently available for work, including people who have lost their jobs or who have voluntarily left work” (para. 8). Together with the lack of financial independence, unemployment is also associated with decreased psychological well-being (McGee & Thompson, 2015; Paul & Moser, 2009). A South African study illustrated the longterm persistence of negative affectivity associated with unemployment as it is correlated with financial hardship (Griep, 2014).

With a global youth¹ unemployment rate of 12.8% (World Bank, 2019b), as compared to the 4.9% unemployment rate of the general population (World Bank, 2019a), emerging adults are vulnerable to unemployment as they first enter the labor market. A similar trend is observable in South Africa where the youth unemployment rate of 53.2% is the highest in the world (World Bank, 2019b). Attending higher education is a possible way for emerging adults to gain a competitive advantage in the labor market. Although developing countries have observed the increased completion of secondary and tertiary education, high unemployment rates leave graduates opting for informal employment with less benefits (Juárez & Gayet, 2014). In South Africa, a degree does not guarantee any form of employment as 8.2% of graduates (below the age of 35) can attest (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2019). The aim of this article is to explore how emerging adult graduates perceive their transition to adulthood during unemployment through the narrative plotlines they relay.

¹ The World Bank defines youth as the population aged 15–24.

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

The Significance of Attending Higher Education

The trend of increased time in education is one of the signifying features that prompted a new developmental conception of the ages from late adolescence through the 20s (Arnett, 2000). Furthermore, Arnett (2016, p. 219) described the American college as “the emerging adult environment par excellence”; a time to explore worldviews and possibilities in work and love but also the “joy de vivre” associated being young. Potential economic advantages also carry importance and in a longitudinal study, Bar-Haim et al. (2019) found that more educated people enjoy greater economic advantages and for younger cohorts, higher education is a greater necessity to earn a living in the current employment industry. Provided 32.7% of the South African population live below the poverty line (Stats SA, 2015), while the likelihood of employment increases for individuals with higher education qualifications (Festus et al., 2016), obtaining financial stability might be a greater driving force for South African emerging adults to enter higher educations. Mhlongo and O’Neill (2013) found that prospective students from lower economic statuses are pressured by their families to pursue academic programs that take less time to complete while offering employment guarantees.

Higher education has a specific significance in the South African context. To safeguard the ideals of a democratic society after the end of Apartheid in 1994, a White Paper on the transformation of higher education was published to ensure that people from all racial denominations have equal access (Department of Education, 1997). A key purpose of the South African higher education system is to equip members from all segments of society for the labor market to enhance equality in opportunity (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013). With continuous effort, including increases in government subsidies, higher education became more accessible with a growing graduate throughput rate that is expected to rise in the future (DHET, 2018).

Entry to the Labor Market

Stable employment is an adult commitment that can bring many benefits to the lives of emerging adults. In a systematic meta-review of the literature, results indicated that

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

employment is related to personal growth opportunities, increased social status, more resources to handle demands, enhanced autonomy, and decreased depression and anxiety (Modini et al., 2016). Satisfactory employed emerging adults showed improved self-esteem and life satisfaction over 10 years when compared to those that did not make a successful transition to employment (Winefield et al., 2017). Schulenberg et al. (2004) found that work proved to be a developmental task with a significant effect on maintaining or enhancing well-being from adolescence into adulthood. These findings mark the significance of work in the successful transition to adulthood.

Yet emerging adults are more likely than older cohorts to encounter stumbling blocks in their search of stable employment. Emerging adults can easily get caught in the experience trap, a phenomenon where lack of experience would prevent employment that would provide experience (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2012). A study in South Africa's banking industry demonstrated that employers are resistant to employ and invest in graduates because they are perceived as lacking in critical work-related skills (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Even when hired, emerging adults' limited time of appointment and lower severance packages make them vulnerable to layoffs (ILO, 2012). Further reasons for graduate unemployment in South Africa include, obtaining qualifications that are not in demand, poor quality educational, continuing discrimination against certain racial denominations, lack of work experience, and unrealistic expectations about entry-level work (Pauw et al., 2008). In addition, educational expansion decreased the economic returns of recent graduates when compared to older cohorts, especially in labor markets that are not offering sufficient skill-based jobs to graduates (Bar-Haim et al., 2019). In the context of increased access to higher education, a degree no longer distinguishes graduates in the manner it had with previous cohorts.

Moreover, the impact of initial instability in the labor market has future implications. A study by Krahn et al. (2015) revealed that involuntary employment fluctuations during emerging adulthood has a negative association with employment outcomes 32 years later, which might be explained by the loss in social and human capital. Similarly, Gregg and Tominey (2005) provided evidence of an unemployment scar that results in a significant

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

decrease in income 42 years down the line. Longer periods of unemployment throughout life are also associated with higher psychological distress at age 50 (Daly & Delaney, 2013). Prolonged unemployment makes emerging adults susceptible to become discouraged work-seekers, a term used to describe people who are available to work but gave up seeking employment due to the belief that their efforts will not result in employment (Stats SA, 2019). The evidence suggests that emerging adults are economically exploited without the necessary political representation that should prevent further loss of power in the labor market (Côté, 2014).

The Transition to Adulthood and the Impact of Unemployment

Traditionally, adult commitments such as completing education, full-time employment, independent living, marriage, and parenthood marked the transition to adulthood (Panagakis, 2015). Instead, emerging adult theory posits that there are many pathways to make the transition to adulthood and that traditional adult milestones are often delayed for the sake of education and self-exploration (Arnett, 2004). Juárez and Gayet (2014) highlighted the diversity of adult transitions in developing countries where emerging adults experience the tensions of Western ideals and their own inequality, exclusions, and poverty. Arnett (2011) suggested that in developing countries, emerging adults have a briefer transition to adult responsibilities. The perceived pressure to achieve adult status might be explained by greater focus on others, carrying more responsibilities, and more perceived instability experienced by emerging adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Landberg et al., 2019). Compared to their counterparts, emerging adults from poverty-stricken backgrounds become parents earlier, marry later, and while their chances of leaving home before the age of 18 are higher, the possibility of staying at home longer is also more likely (Berzin & De Marco, 2010).

There appears to be another possible trajectory in the journey to becoming an adult in the developing world where taking up adult commitments are hindered. For instance, repeating school grades, breaks from higher education, and entering unstable economic markets can delay the transition to full-time employment among emerging adults from developing countries (Juárez & Gayet, 2014). In the Middle East, the term *waithood* was

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

originally used to describe emerging adults who were waiting for adulthood as they prolonged marriage by first focusing on accruing sufficient financial reserves (Singerman, 2007). The author also described concern about the implications for delayed identity development as a generation is waiting for employment opportunities while staying with their parents for longer and prolonging the start of their own families. Uncertainty in one domain in life could limit commitments in other domains, and it was found that emerging adults who are unsure about maintaining stable employment are more likely to delay parenthood and marriage (Mills & Blossfeld, 2009). Sharon (2016) further noted that prolonging the transition to adult responsibilities implies that emerging adults will miss out on consequent opportunities for maturation. In studying African emerging adults, Honwana (2013) suggested that waithood prevents emerging adults from following conventional patterns, which requires choices on new ways of defining their approach to work, intimacy, family life, and citizenship.

It is especially after investing significant time in tertiary education that graduates might feel resentment and frustration as a result of not receiving the promised reward for the sacrifices they made to obtain a qualification (ILO, 2012). When considering the structural hurdles that emerging adults have to overcome to make adult commitments, Côté and Bynner (2008) caution against a viewpoint that emerging adults choose to avoid adulthood. The philosopher, Loren Lomasky (2016), wrote about the economic intergenerational injustices faced by current emerging adult cohorts and commented that: “At an age when young men and women are biologically and culturally primed to take on adult responsibilities, they find themselves stuck in an extended childhood” (p. 6). Lehohla (2016, p. viii) mentioned concerns regarding unemployed emerging adults in South Africa and their vulnerability against economic and social insecurities, referring to them as “a demographic time bomb.”

The research at hand set out to explore how emerging adult graduates perceive unemployment while progressing toward adulthood. A narrative approach made it possible to pay attention to the whole career narrative, and unemployment could be explored from a holistic perspective. A focus on temporality is one of the distinguishing features of a narrative analysis, which makes it possible to perceive people and their experiences in terms of a past,

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

present, and future (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Tanner (2006) stated that the journey to adulthood is marked by times of progression and regression instead of always being linear. To this end, the plots of the participants' narratives will be analyzed to track their perception of progression and regression. The exploratory research question is: What are the shared narrative plots of unemployment as it impacts the transition to adulthood among South African emerging adult graduates?

Method

This study was part of a larger research project (Van Lill, 2020) that investigated the narratives of unemployed emerging adults who had graduated. To ensure a credible study, the ethics committee associated with the University of Pretoria granted permission for the continuation of the research project.

Participants

To be selected for the individual interviews, candidates had to be between the ages of 21 and 30, had acquired a South African university qualification, and had been unemployed for at least 6 months. Only candidates who would be available for interviews in Gauteng, a province in South Africa, were chosen to participate in the research. Due to the Protection of Personal Information Act (Republic of South Africa, 2013), which prevents access to student records, the participants were selected through a convenient sampling method.

Nongovernment organizations that promote unemployed emerging adults, personal acquaintances, and professional online platforms were consulted to obtain participants.

Deciding on strategies to determine a sample size is a complicated matter in qualitative research (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Instead of aiming to achieve data saturation, Levitt et al. (2017) suggest data adequacy as an alternative to ensure sufficient richness in the data. During the conceptualization of the research, a number of 12 participants were deemed practical to the scope of the study. After the data collection, the data proved adequately rich and extensive, and a decision was made not to include any further interviews. Table 1 displays biographic characteristics of the participants.

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

Table 1

Biographical Details of Participants

Name	Age	Race	Field of study	Qualification	Time unemployed
Phatu	30	Black African	Geography	Bachelor's degree and post-graduate certificate	11 months
Ian	28	White	Informatics	Bachelor's degree	1 year
Funani	25	Black African	Media studies	Bachelor's degree	1 year
Zanele	26	Black African	Dietetics	Honour's degree	2 years, 2 months (26 months)
Miriam	29	Black African	Psychology	Master's degree	2 years (24 months)
Akani	28	Black African	Education	Diploma and post-graduate certificate	6 months
Tanya	27	White	Home economics	Bachelor's degree	9 months
Tsepiso	26	Black African	Human resource management	Diploma	1 year (12 months)
Dimpho	27	Black African	Horticulture	Bachelor's of technology degree	1 year (12 months)
Danai	27	Black African	Chemical engineering	Master's degree	10 months
Hlanganani	26	Black African	Tourism management	Bachelor's degree	2 years (24 months)
Melinda	27	White	Psychology	Master's degree	11 months

Note. The names provided in the table are pseudonyms. Adapted from “The unfolding of meaning in narratives of unemployed young adult graduates,” by R. Van Lill, 2020, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria, South Africa, p.71.

Data Gathering Procedure

Semistructured interviews were deemed most appropriate to obtain rich personal data that pertain to the research topic. The intention was to elicit career narratives that started from the first decision to pursue a profession, continued through higher education and consequent unemployment until the time of the interview. The first author conducted the interviews in secluded locations that were convenient for the participants in terms of distance. After being informed of the extent of the study, publication of their stories, and their right to withdraw at any time, the participants provided informed consent. Based on the recommendation of

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

Josselson (2013), the participants were asked to relay how the narrative started, how it evolved, and how they were able to handle each part. Examples of the questions that were asked are: “What is the first memory you have of knowing that you would study the course that you completed?” “What were your expectations about work after graduation?” and “Are there people in your life who are concerned about whether you have a job?” A balance between directive questions and open questions made it possible to gain a holistic account of the participants’ perspectives while remaining within the parameters of the study as set out by the research question (Josselson, 2013). This approach allowed the coconstruction of a narrative while still ensuring a faithful representation of the participants’ accounts. White and Epston (1990) maintained that although people might have lived rich narratives, they tend to only share specific parts while other valuable sections remain untold. By probing further on parts of the narratives that the participants indicated as important, either verbally or nonverbally, rich insights emerged. The interviews lasted between 32 and 67 min and the participants received no remuneration.

The prompts and questions continued until a point when the participants were less forthcoming with information and the themes became repetitive. At this time, the participants had the chance to share any further thoughts on the discussion. Two weeks after the interview, all the participants were contacted to hear whether they had more insights to convey on the research topic in the form of a text message or supplement interview. Only one participant responded with a text message that had been included in the transcription. The first author transcribed the interviews to enhance familiarization with the data. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcriptions and the participants are represented by pseudonyms that portray their respective cultures and/or first languages.

Data Analysis

Narratives have a retrospective capacity that makes it possible to understand how events formed a plot over time (Freeman, 2015). The plots that emerged from the participants’ narratives provided the means of analysis. Polkinghorne (1988) defines a plot as an organizing theme that signifies the importance of every event as it is related to a larger

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

story line. The direction of the plotlines can happen in three ways: In progressive narratives, there are actions toward a goal, regressive narratives contain movement away from the goal, and stable narratives have little progress (Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

After initial readings of the transcriptions, it was possible to identify goals that the participants set out to achieve after obtaining their higher education qualification. The participants mentioned experiences that brought them closer to and further from their envisioned goals, which made it possible to identify progressive as well as regressive plotlines. A graphical representation could then be created of each participant's career narrative with upward curves symbolizing progression and downward curves indicating regression as it occurred over time. Similar plotline trends emerged when the participants' visual narratives were compared. Excerpts from the interviews will follow to demonstrate the identified plotlines and enhance the confirmability and authenticity of the results.

Results

When discussing reasons for entering higher education, the participants mentioned goals related to their careers such as gaining a good salary, experiencing challenge, pursuing an interest, and helping others. They also shared other goals they would be able to achieve with a stable income, such as gaining independence, assisting their families out of poverty, buying a car or a house, marrying, and providing to children. For example, Tsepiso explained how a destitute situation at home after his stepfather left urged him to improve his future financial prospects by succeeding in higher education:

There was an area of focus, to say, "This is the situation. You have to push harder, because now. . . I'm the firstborn." I have two little brothers. So, naturally, they are looking up to me to say, "Okay, fine, we need to get out of this situation." Now I had more reason.

The participants had six plotlines in common as they moved toward their goals as demonstrated in Figure 1.

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

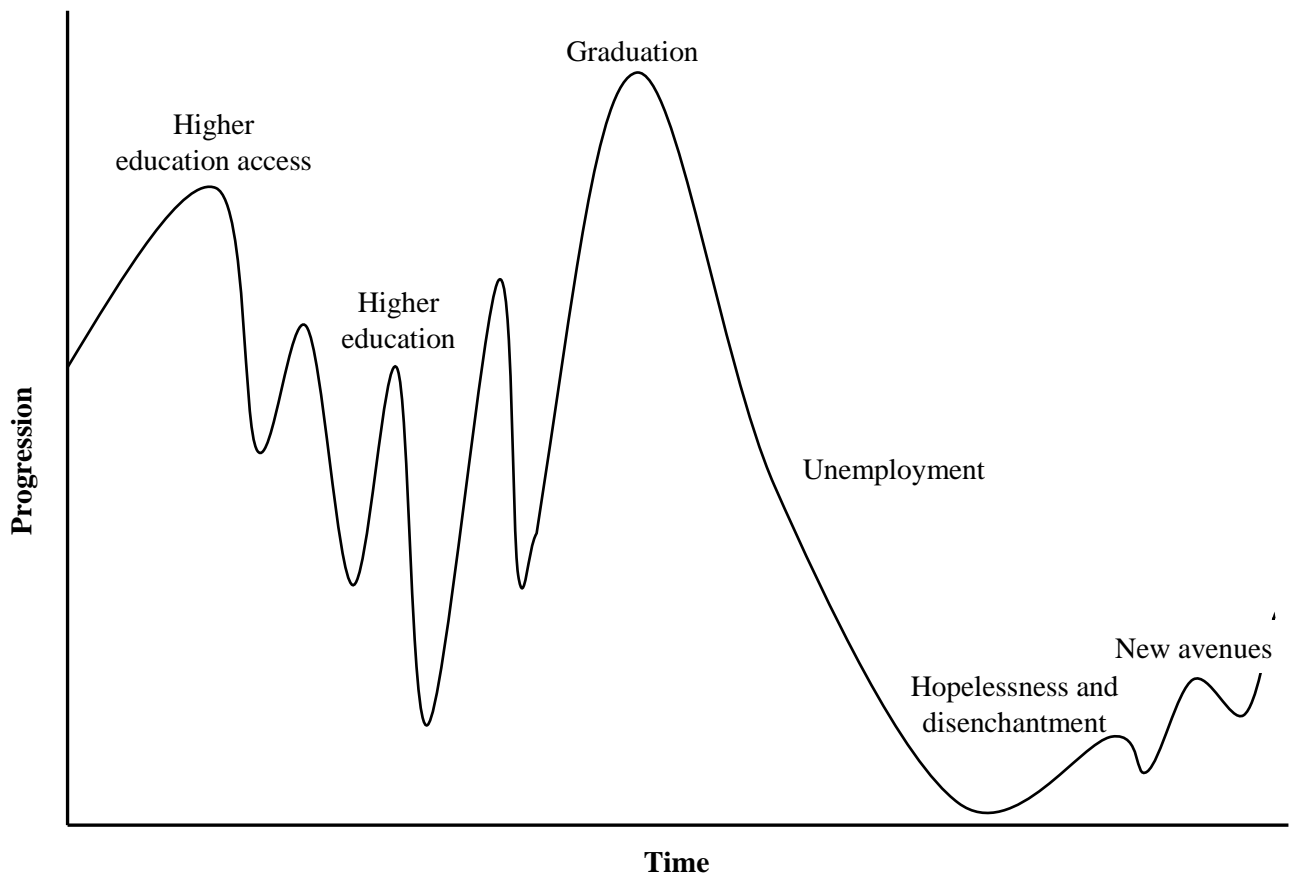


Figure 1. Shared Progressive and Regressive Narrative Plotlines. *Note.* Upward lines indicate progressive plotlines while downward lines show regressive plotlines as the narratives unfolded over time. Adapted from “The unfolding of meaning in narratives of unemployed young adult graduates,” by R. Van Lill, 2020, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria, South Africa, p.116.

Plotline 1: The Upward Mobility of Higher Education Access (Progression)

Gaining entry to higher education was an important achievement for the participants in reaching their occupational and lifestyle goals. Like most South African students, many of the participants were first-generation students, and their presence in higher education was a groundbreaking accomplishment. For instance, financial constraints prevented Zanele from entering higher education after school, and she only received a bursary after a year that allowed her to leave her home village to further her studies in dietetics:

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

For me, it was a privilege It's like I'm unique to come to university, yes. But then, it was the happiest moment for me to come here . . . because of most people wanted to be at this university, but they couldn't.

Miriam said the following about her thoughts on higher education: "To me, the slogan, you know: The key to success is education, was strongly ingrained in my mind. So, I was like, 'Get the education, then you will eventually get the job.'" Gaining a higher education qualification was regarded as the first step that would result in employment and then achievement in other life aspirations. Akani shared how she envisioned her life to follow:

In your head, it's like, "I'm going to get my matric [colloquial term used in South Africa to describe the last year of school, i.e., Grade 12]. I'm going to study for three years, and then going to get a job, and then I'm going to buy a car. A few years down the line, I'm going to get married, have a house, start my own businesses . . ." You just see life, like, as soon as you have a diploma, a degree, like, it's easier to get a job.

Plotline 2: The Ups and Downs of Higher Education (Progression and Regression)

After entering higher education, the participants realized that their journey to obtain a degree was not a linear process. Challenges during their studies included insufficient funds to cover costs such as textbooks, transport, and accommodation, challenging academic work, and uncertainty about the courses they started. Miriam explained the investment she made in her future: "I sacrificed a lot of things, being social life and seeing family, because I thought to myself, the end goal, it will all be worth it in the end. If I just get to this point." Yet the participants also emphasized highlights in their years of study that included practical exposure, enhanced social skills, and personal growth. Dimpho said: "I was so inspired to see that, like, this thing, it's not only about learning, it's about, like, exploring your mind, taking—just thinking out of the box." For Tanya university had been a "learning curve": "It's fun. It's a time of exploration And it's also a great time to . . . experience who you are, what you're capable of, challenging yourself."

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

Plotline 3: The Highlight of Graduation (Progression)

Graduation was the highlight of the career narrative—a public acknowledgment of their hard work and accomplishment. Danai, who left her country of origin to study in South Africa, admitted that she had been putting her life on hold until she qualified as a chemical engineer. Although Danai came to doubt her initial career choice and failed modules, which extended her time of studying from 5 to 7 years, she persisted because she did not want to disappoint her parents. Graduating was a great relief to her:

Because, when you think that you're actually not going to make it, when you're just there and it's all dark, you don't see any light. I thought I will never make it, but when I did, I was so relieved. I felt like a burden had been lifted off my shoulders, and, you know, when you see your family is happy. They even had a party for me.

Plotline 4: The Initial Disruption of Employment Expectations (Regression)

A sense of accomplishment was established as the participants were achieving success in higher education. They were hoping to achieve the promises that a higher education qualification was meant to bring to their lives but instead was met with a sense of disbelief when they were unable to obtain employment. When asked about his aspirations after graduating, Tsepiso answered: “Well, I expected to get at least a good-paying job. That is what I expected, yeah. That is the whole reason behind me actually going to school.” There was a shared hope that the sacrifices they made while studying would be worthwhile if they were rewarded by work. The promise of employment bringing stability to her life motivated Zanele to finish her studies, and she was disappointed when this did not happen after graduation: “I can imagine the struggle that I went through during my studies, and I thought that, after graduating, things would be much easier; it would be fine.” Unemployment came as an unforeseen halt to the progressive trajectories their professional lives were taking. Melinda explained how not being able to work, hindered the ambitions she had for adult life:

And I know we all are like super unrealistic when we're younger: “I'm going to be a billionaire when I'm 30 years old. I'm going to have a PhD when I'm that age,” and so on. So, you have these big dreams . . . So, I think I thought I would have had

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

children by now, for example, or I would have liked to have a baby, or would have liked to buy a new car, or, you know, small things and big things. Not having an income actually just pushes you to think, “Oh, crap, I’m not really where I thought I would be ten years ago, because, ten years ago, I thought I would be a, b, c, d, e, and now I’m not.”

Plotline 5: Increased Hopelessness and Disenchantment (Further Regression)

As time passed and the participants continued searching for work without success, the disbelief of unemployment gave way to increasing hopelessness regarding their ability to find employment. Miriam explained the frustration of not being able to move forward:

I had a full tank of gas, and now I’m just at a stop sign, and I just can’t seem to move. And you see things happening around you, drivers everywhere, and you just can’t seem to move from this stop sign. That’s how I feel, that I’m at a dead-end stop sign.

Tanya, who was the top achiever in her class, said: “Because, if you work, you’re working towards something, you’re achieving something. At least you’re not just sitting at home. For me, now . . . sometimes, I feel a bit useless.” Hlanganani expressed the psychological suffering he experienced as a result of the standstill in his life:

Whenever this stress comes, like, I have, like, this thing of overthinking. “What’s happening? . . . most of my friends are working . . . why is it only me who’s not working? Some of my friends are driving, why . . . it’s only me who’s not driving?” I ask myself, overthinking. Like, sometimes, I even think, hai, even if I could die, it’s fine, because I’m useless.

The setback of not achieving their hoped-for goals became more pronounced when the participants compared their lives to their peers. Ian stated: “I haven’t earned my own, per se. Because, I mean, I’m 28. I’m looking at my friends buying houses, buying cars, getting married, making families, and growing up.” Funani felt uncomfortable when asked about her lack of progress in life, which restrained her socialization with peers: “At past, I used to go and visit friends, but, now, I don’t usually go to visit them because they will be asking me a

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

lot of questions: ‘What are doing in life? Why are you not working? What’s wrong with your degree, and what-what?’” The participants’ despair can be likened to a grief process where they are mourning the loss of the career success they envisioned to follow graduation.

Plotline 6: Seeking New Avenues to Achieve Goals (Progression)

Although the participants described times of despondence, all of them expressed a commitment to continue seeking employment. They recognized the need to carry on with life even when feelings of grief returned. The participants revealed different ways of reevaluating previous expectations and adopting more realistic views about entering the South African labor market. As a result, the participants reached a point in the narrative where they could connect with their initial goals and align their efforts accordingly. Dimpho felt a strong need to continue seeking employment in an effort to take on adult responsibilities:

This stage of life, I saw that, you know, like now, I am an adult. I am matured. I have to do my own things. I can’t keep on asking my—for my parents, you know. I have to build my own life. So, like, it’s important for me to have a job, so that I can build my own house, be able to buy my own roll-on, my own Dawn [brand of body lotion], instead of asking, and, . . . as I’m in this age, . . . my parents are getting older.

Hlanganani felt pressure to support his family and shared how this goal convinced him to continue searching for work opportunities:

What keep me motivated, it’s like, it’s the situation at home. That’s what. They keep me going, and then this: I have a little daughter, she’s four years old. She’s going to school next year. So, you know, it’s a big responsibility. So, that’s why I, like, I don’t give up. Whenever they don’t even give me feedback, I don’t give up, I keep on applying.

After working hard to qualify as a psychologist, a profession that Miriam felt very passionate about, she voiced the strategy she devised to persist with her career journey despite the unemployment deterrent:

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

So, if it means my car being stuck at that stop sign, I'll have to get out of the car, start walking amongst the cars. It's fine, but I just can't stay put. So, that's what I see. It's, when those tough times are here, get out of the car. You know where your car is. But you need to get out of the car and start doing something different, it's not moving. So, that's what I do, and that kind of keeps me going. It is tough, but I'm going to fake it until I make it.

Discussion

Provided South Africa's political history and current economic volatility, higher education participation is encouraged as a way to improve societal equality as well as individual employment prospects. When considering holistic career narratives, it became evident that the participants attached specific goals to their pursuit of higher education qualifications, which included outcomes associated with their professional lives but also lifestyle improvements they hoped to enjoy. They equated graduation with employment and employment with an opportunity to have a good adult life. Noteworthy is that in contrast to the self-focus associated with emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), some of the Black African participants indicated a strong sense of responsibility to improve the financial well-being of their parents and siblings, which is in line with previous research on lower socioeconomic populations (Landberg et al., 2019). In South Africa, this might be a reflection of ubuntu, a value system that emphasizes communal worldviews.

The plotlines indicated initial progress in gaining entry to higher education, followed by times of excitement and growth but also challenge and sacrifice. The current sample crafted professions for themselves through higher education and desired work as a doorway to more adult commitments. Although some emerging adults might choose to prolong the moratorium for further self-focus and exploration, the participants indicated an eager readiness to take on adult commitments. Graduation was a public acknowledgment of their achievement, which made their investment in higher education worthwhile. Yet after the highlight of qualifying, unemployment came as an unexpected stumbling block that curbed their continuing progression toward successful adulthood.

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

In accordance with previous research, the inability to accomplish hoped for commitments had a detrimental effect on their well-being (Cockshott et al., 2018; Sharon, 2016). The participants highlighted feelings of hopelessness, frustration, and uselessness. Although emerging adults might endorse more varied milestones (Schulenberg et al., 2004; Sharon, 2016), the current sample emphasized traditional milestones of adulthood, indicating the importance of these commitments as a tangible way to assess their progress toward adulthood. The participants were more acutely aware of lagging behind in their development as adults when they were around peers. Accordingly, Panagakis (2015) found that individuals aged 30 compared the timing and the quality of their adult transitions to peers to determine how much they feel like adults. Yet, although the transition to adulthood did not happen as the participants hoped, they were able to achieve some of the traditional markers, including living separately from their families of origin, getting married, and having children. Schulenberg et al. (2004) suggested that success in one domain of adult transition can make up for failure in another.

Côté (2006) warned that viewing emerging adulthood as a carefree time for exploration can draw attention away from the need from policy makers to intervene where willing emerging adults are unable to enter the labor market. The prolonged effect of initial unemployment on career outcomes (Cockx & Ghirelli, 2016; Krahn et al., 2015) as well as the vulnerability of emerging adults, entering the labor market (Bell & Blanchflower, 2015), emphasize the necessity of interventions aimed at easing the transition to employment. The South African labor market is creating a waithood for emerging adults who are ready to embark on their careers. While unemployment among emerging adults in welfare states raises fiscal sustainability questions, in South African, there are additional socioeconomic concerns regarding a poor educational system, lack of social cohesion, gender and racial inequality, and poor governance (Holte et al., 2019). Although South Africa has many government and nongovernment initiatives aimed at promoting work-related skills among emerging adults and making the hiring of first-time employees more alluring to employers (Burnett, 2014), consistently high unemployment rates indicate the need for more impactful interventions.

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

The current participants eventually came to grips with the labor market realities that were out of their control. As suggested by Paul et al. (2016), they remained dedicated to their initial goals, which motivated them to seek new ways of achieving them. Similarly, when Du Toit et al. (2018) explored unemployment experiences of South Africans who live in townships, optimism was prevalent despite living in a context with limited opportunities and extreme poverty. Previous research also shows that challenges associated with certain racial and ethnic backgrounds do not prevent emerging adults from seeing possibilities as they chose to view hardships as an opportunity for growth and strive toward success (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). While high unemployment continues in many countries, emerging adults might be best advised to reconsider their initial expectations for the transition to adulthood. Instead of being disheartened by not reaching desired adult commitments, emerging adults can set personally meaningful and achievable milestones and rather measure their maturation accordingly (Sharon, 2016).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was explorative in nature and further research is required to validate the effect of unemployment on emerging adults' transition to adulthood. The aim was to conduct an in-depth exploration of subjective perceptions of unemployment, bringing the relevance of the current findings to other contexts into question. Future studies are required to investigate how the achievement of adult markers is impacted by unemployment among other emerging adult populations. The scope of the study did not allow for comparison between different socioeconomic or cultural groups. The responsibility to take care of their families was only mentioned by the Black African participants and further exploration on how this type of pressure play out for people of different backgrounds could inform supportive interventions to limit continuing inequality in South Africa and elsewhere. Further research projects could extend to unemployed emerging adults without higher education qualifications to consider how their perceptions of unemployment are similar or different. Of interest might also be research into the factors that contribute or subtract from emerging adults' abilities to achieve the adult commitments they set out to achieve. Provided high youth unemployment in several

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

countries, prospective research projects could explore helpful responses that might prevent emerging adults from becoming discouraged work seekers.

Conclusion

Emerging adulthood can be viewed as the scaffolding that offers direction into the adult years (Tanner, 2006). The current study contributes to available literature on emerging adults and work by signifying the effect of unemployment on the ability to accomplish desired adult commitments. It further highlights the stagnation experienced by graduates who invested significant time and energy in their professional lives as they encounter structural hurdles in the labor market that prevent them from finding employment. Although every narrative was unique, similar plotlines of progression and regression toward goals emerged between the different narratives. The let-down of unemployment came unexpectedly and caused great disappointment and distress after the investment to complete a higher education qualification. Results from the current study further demonstrate the inability to attain hoped for adult commitments as a possible contribution to the poor subjective wellbeing associated with unemployment that is specific to an emerging adult population. While more effective interventions are required to decrease youth unemployment, more research is required to guide emerging adults toward alternative ways of achieving adult status. Perhaps as a consequence of their optimism, this study is also a reminder of the resilience that emerging adults can display despite disappointments and persisting labor market challenges. The participants in the current sample illustrated that emphasizing and attaching importance to their original goals gave them the motivation to continue their efforts to find employment. In the meanwhile, they also found ways to adopt their initial expectations and still achieve some adult commitments, albeit in a manner that is qualitatively different from previous ideals.

LIFE AT A STOP SIGN: NARRATIVE PLOTS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD DURING UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATES

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