

# South Africa's Youth: A Deficit or Dividend?

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Ladies and gentlemen,

All protocol observed.

## INTRODUCTION

- Let me first of all, thank you for the opportunity to share with you some of the lifelong work I have done and continue to do as a scholar.
- Chair, I am a sociologist and since obtaining my PhD, my research interest has been in the area of adolescent and youth development.
- It is in view of this research interest in the youth that today I address you on issues affecting South Africa's youth.
- Chair, while there is so much to say about the youth, allow me to limit my talk to answering a very pertinent question about the youth: **South Africa's Youth: A Deficit or Dividend?**

## South Africa's Youth: A Deficit or Dividend?

- I am sure few of you will doubt the fact that in recent decades so much has been written about the youth.
- This obsession with the youth is mostly a function of the demographic changes that have been taking place in mostly the developing or third world.
- This situation arises because even though a country achieves success in reducing infant mortality, mothers still have a large number of children.
- Chair, the net result of this situation is that a large share of the population is comprised of children and young adults.
- In Demography, this obsession with the youth has become known as the "**Demographic Dividend**".
- Demographic dividend means that contrary to conventional belief, a large number of children in a population is not necessarily bad because such persons can be harnessed for national development.

# South Africa's Youth: A Deficit or Dividend?

- In Africa, about 40% of the population is under 15 years, and nearly 70% is under 30 years.
- Chair, like the rest of Africa, South Africa has a youthful population.
- According to the 2011 population census, about 21 million or 41% of the country's population are children under the age of 20 years, while 34 million or 68% are under the age of 35 years (Statistics South Africa 2011).
- These statistics explain Africa's, and indeed the world's obsession with the youth.
- Today, every political party in Africa has either a "Youth Wing", "Youth League" or "Youth Organizer" as politicians jockey to cash in on the youth vote with various promises to solve the problems of the youth.
- But Chair, despite the accumulating literature on the youth in recent years, what is clearly discernible in the literature is the fact that consensus as to the importance of the youth in society has been very elusive.

# THE DEFICIT MODEL OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

- Chair, while my core training was in sociology, over the span of this training I have been exposed to other disciplines, including, social anthropology and psychology.
- As a result of this exposure, I have come under the spell of developmental psychologists, the most prominent of which is Erik Erikson's work on *human development*.
- Colleagues, the point about all these intellectual influences on my profound interest in the youth is that until recently what was dominant in the literature was the conceptualization of youth as a **problematic period in the life span**.
- The fundamental belief was that "Youth" was a rebellious stage in the developmental process or it was seen as a **deficit** by all accounts.
- Indeed, this is the paradigm within which one can place the work of the renowned American Anthropologist, Margaret Meade's book, *Coming of Age in Samoa* published in 1928.
- Expectedly, Meade's treatise engendered years of intense debate and controversy on questions pertaining to society, culture, and science.
- Specifically, Meade's central thesis was that Samoan culture had more relaxed sexual norms, especially, amongst the youth, an observation which reinforced the "**problematic**" nature of youth paradigm.

# THE DEFICIT MODEL OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Chair, as far as South Africa is concerned, the exemplar of the *deficit model of youth* development was the body of knowledge that accumulated in the late 1990s and early 2000s by a group of scholars-mainly psychologists, psychiatrists and public health experts-based at the Medical Research Council and at the Universities of Cape Town and the Western Cape.

- Almost invariably, all the studies that came under this paradigm of research supported the notion of the "turbulent" teen or "troublesome" youth, essentially replicating studies in the Western context.
- A major outlet for these studies was the **Journal of Adolescent Mental Health**, housed at the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Cape Town.

This view of the youth by this community of scholars was nurtured by such social problems by the youth as:

Alcohol and drug use and abuse; multiple sexual partners; early onset of sexual intercourse; lack of protection for sexual intercourse; unplanned and teenage pregnancies.

## *On the issue Substance Use for example:*

- Flisher *et al.* (1993) found that 30% of secondary school students from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds in the Cape Peninsula were currently drinking;
- Rocha-Silva *et al.* (1996) found that 34% of black African students in Soweto were current drinkers, while 43% of them had taken alcohol at some point in their lives;
- Simbayi *et al.* (2006) observed that alcohol intake among South African adolescents was a major concern and had been linked to such other risk behaviors as unsafe sex, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school and delinquent or criminal behavior.

# THE DEFICIT MODEL OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

## *On the issue dysfunctional Sexual Behaviors:*

- Many such studies observed that not only do South African youth use substances such as alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, but they also engaged in high levels of sexual activity and unprotected sex.
- Pettifor (2004), found that among the sexually experienced youths aged 15-19 years, 90% of the females and 73% of the males have had sex in the past 12 months.
- Moreover, Pettifor found that only one-third of the youth who had had sex in the past 12 months had consistently used a condom.

# OWN CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEFICIT PARADIGM IN SOUTH AFRICA

Chair, my own research on the youth in South Africa has not been exempt from projecting the negative view of the youth in society. 3 of my early works are implicated in this *Youth as a Deficit Paradigm*:

- The first publication in this context was titled, “**Family Predictors of Adolescent Substance Use: The Case of High School Pupils in the Cape peninsula**” (*The Journal of Adolescent Mental Health*, 2006).
- Among other findings, Amoateng *et al.* found that the mean tobacco and alcohol consumption levels were higher amongst coloureds and whites compared to black Africans.
- In the second study, “**The Effect of Socio-Demographic Factors on Risky Sexual Behaviors of Adolescents in the North West Province of South Africa**” (*African Population Studies* (2013). In this study,
- Amoateng *et al.* found that in the North West Province, 44% of the adolescents in the sample were sexually experienced, and of those 61% were male while 39% were female.

In the third study, “**Social Structure and Sexual Behavior of Black African Adolescents in the North-West Province of South Africa.**” (*The South African Review of Sociology* (2013),

Amoateng & Kalule-Sabiti (2013) found that:

- 42% of the respondents indicated that they had had sex in the past twelve months;
- Of these, more than a quarter (26%) said they did not use a condom;
- Moreover, while 84% of Grade 11 pupils had used a condom, only 62% of Grade 9 pupils had done so.

# THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

Chair, the pertinent question to ask at this juncture is:  
**How does one make sense of the seemingly depressing statistics about South Africa's youth?**

- To understand these statistics and the evolution of research on the youth experience, I want to briefly discuss a particular piece of scholarship which became almost like a bible for almost every discipline in the US during my Graduate School days in that country.
- In his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn, a pre-eminent Philosopher of Science who was based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) when the book was first published in 1962, observes how a prevailing paradigm or worldview at a particular point in time becomes the rallying point for research among a community of scientists during the ascendancy of that particular paradigm or worldview.
- This, Kuhn referred to as a *period of normal science*.
- He argues that the view of science under which scientists organize their work cannot be divorced from the prevailing cultural, social and political conditions in a society at that point in time.
- In fact, Kuhn shows how the works of such physical scientists as Copernicus in Astronomy, Lavoisier in Chemistry, Isaac Newton in Physics and the earlier Greek Scientists were all influenced by the socio-cultural conditions in society during their times.
- So, what were the social and cultural conditions in South Africa which formed the backdrop of the *deficit paradigm* of youth development?

# THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

In a piece titled, "*We are Failing our Youth*" published in the Mail&Guardian on June 10, 2018 to celebrate last year's Youth Day, Professor Barney Pitso, couldn't have painted a better picture of the social conditions in South Africa which have engendered and nurtured the "*deficit youth*" Paradigm:

***"In our country today, about 50% of our youngsters are unemployed. About 3 million young people are out of school and out of work, or languishing in meaningless pursuits..."***

***Today, young people die like flies, either through senseless and gratuitous violence or involvement in crime of all kinds.....***

***Children, especially girl children, are violated and raped, and many women are killed by their close partners or relatives".***

Chair, because the *paradigm of deficit* or the view that youth is problematic dominated the scholarship on the youth for a long time, prevailing empirical research was organized around this worldview not only in the Western context, but also in South Africa, and the predominant finding was to prove this *thesis of crisis of youth* in the developmental process.

# NORMAL SCIENCE AND CRISIS: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN YOUTH RESEARCH

- Chair, one critical element in Thomas Kuhn's treatise is the concept of "**crisis**" which helps us to explain how paradigms shift or change as far as worldviews are concerned.
- According to Kuhn, an existing paradigm gives way to another paradigm when the old paradigm is no longer able to explain new realities or what he calls "**anomalies**". This, according to him, ushers in a new period of **normal science**.
- It is needless to say that the popularity of the paradigm that youth is a problematic period in the developmental process is gradually falling into disfavor.
- This critique comes in the face of hard empirical evidence that there is some good in the youth which must be harnessed for the benefit of society.
- In other words, the works of scholars like Meade, Eriksson and a few of their contemporaries that underwrote the *paradigm of deficit* in regard to youth development have come under heavy fire.
- The critique is simply that every young person has the potential for healthy development because of the relative malleability of the relations between young people, their families and communities (Lerner, 2002).

# NORMAL SCIENCE AND THE SHIFT OF THE OLD PARADIGM

- Consistent with this new thinking about youth development, research attention to spiritual and religious development of youth has been rising in recent years (Boyatsis, 2005).
- Moreover, this positive approach to youth problems in contemporary developmental thinking projects the notion that healthy adolescent development entails a merger of moral and civic identity which results in engagement with such civil society institutions as religion by the youth.

# THE NATURE OF THE CRISIS IN EXISTING YOUTH PARADIGM

- Like youth elsewhere in Africa, South African youngsters still face challenges in the form of widespread poverty, inadequate education, unemployment, civil unrest and disease which pose a serious threat to their health and development.
- Yet, the empirical evidence about youth behavior is not absolutely doom and gloom as the deficit model of youth behaviour will have us believe.
- So, the pertinent question to answer is: If there is a good story to tell about the country's youth, why has the conventional wisdom on youth behavior for a long time told only the story about the **"problematic"** or **"turbulent"** youth?

Chair, the reasons for this state of affairs range from:

- Ideological obsession with projecting a particular worldview of youth behaviour; to
- Preoccupation with examination by researchers of the **"Incidence"** of certain behaviors as opposed to **"Explanations" (Theory building)** of such behaviours.
- This lack of focus on theory building through "explanations" means that those institutions that have been found to promote pro-social behaviors like the family, religion and politics etc. are largely ignored in the analysis of youth behaviors.

# THE NATURE OF THE CRISIS IN EXISTING YOUTH RESEARCH

- Colleagues, I am not contesting the fact that description of a phenomenon is less important than explanation.
- What I am rather arguing is the fact that social phenomena have multiple dimensions and unless we control for these multiple factors in explaining them, we are bound to mislead.

# OWN CONTRIBUTIONS TO POSITIVE YOUTH PARADIGM

- Chair, like most scholars, I have had my own “Damascus” moment as my own work has evolved from the *deficit* to the *positive* model of youth development over the years.
- A few of my studies highlighted this positive view of the youth:

1. Titled “**Family Predictors of Adolescent Substance Use: The Case of High School Students in the Cape Peninsula**” (Journal of Adolescent Mental Health, 2006). We found that:

- Youth who reported strong parental connection were less likely to use alcohol and other substances.
- Parental knowledge and Limit setting were associated with less frequent use of alcohol and tobacco by the youth;
- Very strong **Parental Connection** with the child was associated with lower levels of substance use by the youth;
- Marital conflict and family stress were associated with frequent use of substances.

2. In “**Social Structure and Sexual Behaviour of Black African Adolescents in the North West Province, South Africa**” (The South African Review of Sociology in 2013), same positive view of the youth was underscored when we found that:

- Adolescents who reported strong religiosity were less likely than their counterparts who reported weak religiosity to report lifetime sex.
- When parents monitored the activities of girls they were less likely to report both lifetime and recent sexual activity; and
- When parents monitored the activities of girls they were less likely to report both lifetime and recent sexual activity.

# OWN CONTRIBUTIONS TO POSITIVE YOUTH PARADIGM

Chair, besides examining the institutions of the family and religion, in the last five years I have sought to interrogate youth involvement in politics since civic participation is deemed as a positive behaviour.

3. The work on youth political participation began with a ground breaking study titled **“The End of Politics by the Youth? Higher Education, Youth Identity and Recession of Politics by South Africa’s Born-Frees: A Case Study of Undergraduate Students at a Public University in South Africa”** (*International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 2013).

- In this study, my central hypothesis was that today’s students would mimic the activism of their parents and grandparents and hence would be active political players.

- However, to my utter chagrin, I failed to confirm this hypothesis as evidenced by the following fundamental finding of the study:
- The study essentially corroborated existing studies in that the political participation of the students was rather low, a situation which is a far cry from the political activism of their parents and grandparents in the 1970s.
- Venting out her frustrations in getting the youth to register in the 2014 local government elections the Electoral Commission’s Kate Bapela noted:

***We are chasing that 16-to 29-year old group...At least 10% of them have registered across the country. Surely, that can’t be right? (Mail & Guardian, 2013).***

# BUT POLITICS NOT DEAD FOR THE YOUTH

- On the basis of the data from the UJ study which has since been replicated at North-West University and University of Ghana, one is tempted to draw the conclusion that for the contemporary youth, politics is dead.
  - But, Chair, this is not entirely true because while a quantitative study had created this impression, in-depth interviews with the youth revealed that political interest does not always translate into active participation or engagement.
  - Specifically, the analysis revealed that the political interest levels of the youth do not certainly facilitate their political activity.
  - However, we also found that young people are cognitively engaged in politics through their civic knowledge of political affairs, their interest in political matters, and their interest in discussing politics with significant others (Parents, Relatives and friends).
4. In a study titled, "**Socio-demographic Correlates of Youth Volunteerism**", published in the South African Review of Sociology, **Amoateng (2017)**, observed the following facts about the youth's sense of civic responsibility:
- Generally, South African youth do not only perceive the importance of participating in voluntary activities but actually do participate in various voluntary activities;
  - Males participate more in voluntary activities compared to their female counterparts;
  - Black South African youth have higher participation rates than white South African youth;
  - Afrikaans-speaking whites have higher participation rates than English-speaking whites.

# PATRIOTISM, RACE RELATIONS AND FEAR OF FOREIGNERS

- Chair, related to the youth's interest in civic participation is their sense of patriotism as the country's new democracy deepens.
- In recent years instances of violent service delivery protests, xenophobic attacks, and racial tension have cast serious doubts about the nation-building project and the cohesiveness of the society.
- But these fears fly in the face of the empirical data on the youth in the country. While there may be instances of these problems by the youth, the objective facts point to the contrary.
- The country's youth are patriotic and have proven to be the harbinger of a truly multi-racial and multi-ethnic society.

Two of my studies have underscored the fact that the country's youth are indeed the harbingers of social change.

(1) **"Sense of Belonging and Acceptance of Diversity: A Case Study of Undergraduate Students at the University of Johannesburg,** (*The South African Review of Sociology*, 2016).

(2) **"Social Context Factors and Attitudes towards Interracial Relationships on a South African University Campus"** (*The African Population Studies*, 2014).

Between the 2 studies the following facts about the youth emerged:

- Almost three-quarters (73%) of the students felt they belonged to the country, while most students indicated that they would not like to settle in another country.
- Over three-quarters (76.3%) of the students approved of interracial dating.
- What was encouraging from the finding was that black Africans, who are in the majority in the population, were more likely to approve of interracial dating than other race groups.

# PATRIOTISM, RACE RELATIONS AND ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY

- One critical dimension of the problem of social cohesion facing South Africa is the problem of the negative attitudes towards foreigners or xenophobia.
  - Chair, we all know that the nation-building project has been dogged by the problem of xenophobia since the democratic transition.
  - But while the leadership of society seems to be confounded by this social canker, the solution may well lie in today's youth, especially, those at the tertiary level of the education system. Why am I saying this?
  - My optimism about the youth in regard to the problem of xenophobia is not an idle speculation but rather grounded in empirical facts.
  - In the replicated study at NWU in 2015/16, students were surveyed about their attitudes towards foreigners in various circumstances and the results in general showed favorable attitudes towards foreigners. Here are a few highlights from the survey:
- When students were asked "Foreigners should be allowed into South Africa if they can make a contribution", **70%** of them Strongly Agreed as opposed to only **10%** who strongly disagreed; one-fifth (20%) of them were neutral.
  - When students were asked to respond to the statement, "Attacks against foreigners are wrong", **80%** strongly agreed as opposed to only **11%** who strongly disagreed.
  - Finally, when students were asked to indicate if "foreigners take jobs away from South Africans", only **18%** strongly agreed with this statement compared to more than half (**52%**) who strongly disagreed.

## CONCLUSION

- Chair, today's youth will be tomorrow's adults. I must hasten to say that the purpose of this lecture has not been to convince you that the "future belongs to our youth" because that is as true as saying that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West.
- In fact, we all know that today's youth will be tomorrow's adults. However, our problem as adults is that as we get ready to pass on the baton to the youth, we are not certain about whether they will reach the finish line.
- Indeed, it is a truism that our trepidation in regard to our tomorrow in the hands of today's youth has been informed unfairly by the ascendancy of the *"deficit" paradigm* of youth development in our thought processes until now.
- This is the central message in the years of research I have done and continue to do on the youth, an enterprise which has culminated in today's lecture.
- The purpose of my lecture therefore, I hope, has been to allay our fears of the unknown. Specifically, this lecture has sought to assure you that within the context of the paradigm shift toward a positive youth development model, our future is secure in the hands of the youth of today.
- **In other words, if indeed demography is destiny, South Africa's future is secure.**

**I THANK YOU FOR LISTENING**