What it means to be young in southern Africa: Time to reconceptualise ‘youth’

By Mazuba Haanyama

“She is budding, strong and confident, emerging profoundly. Coming into herself, through herself. Reaching for more. Imagining more, envisioning more. The space between, breathed eternity – she found and re-discovered herself somewhere in between”

“I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.” (Lorde, 1984:40)

It is with this sentiment that I navigate a trail into and through this paper.

I find myself in a precarious position, having to write coherently and innovatively about ‘youth’ in southern Africa. As a young person living, loving and learning in this region, I am inundated with messages about the ‘youth’ (because we are regarded, for the most part, as a homogenous, apathetic, lost group). I encounter numerous messages intricately weaving themselves into a national, regional and global fabric dictating what it means to be young. Again, as though being young was a singular subject position without complexity or variation.
These messages range across a spectrum. I have seen them as large metaphorical warning signs against the perils of what will surely come as I steer my way through this labyrinth called youth. Others are brightly lit banners, showing me and my contemporaries, the dazzling opportunities ahead, provided I stay in school, obey my parents and elders, abstain from sex (or at least delay my debut for as long as I can), and if I really cannot do that, have only one sexual partner for the rest of my life. This is a mouthful – literally – and a bleak picture. Despite its ardent intent to paint a landscape full of promise.

It is the dichotomous formulation of the concept, ‘youth’ that renders this picture so bleak. It is the ‘good’ or ‘bad’, the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ that contains the restriction for what can possibly be imagined for the ‘youth’. As young people, we are either struggling to stay HIV negative (and dismally failing given the staggering HIV incidence in our region and in our age bracket) or struggling to get a break to stay afloat and attain and/or maintain employment.

This paper will discuss what reconceptualising youth may mean for our region and how we may consider reimagining meanings of youth. I will also look at how youth as a concept has been understood through discourses characterized by pathologising constructions of youth cultures (embedded in a larger discourse of development and modernity). Lastly, I will attempt to explore what it means to be young in southern Africa today and hopefully colour this discussion with multiple meanings and understanding of young people’s livelihoods. This discussion will conclude with some key questions about what can be envisioned as possible and desirable for our conceptualisation of ‘youth’ in the region.

**Our subjectivities have disappeared in this picture**

The nuances of our existences as young people are invisible. I say ‘our’ as I locate myself as a young person (dare I be found out?) yet I’m fully cognisant of the fact that my experience does not, in any realm, reflect the experiences of the majority of young people in our region. It is, however, a collective identity that I wear proudly.

I draw on Amina Mama’s understanding of subjectivities for the purpose of attempting to propose a deeper and fuller understanding of the concept youth. I suggest that within a more complex understanding of subjectivities lies a further understanding of the ways discourse provides the grounds for subjectivities to be articulated.

*There is no universal subject but only particular subjectivities and subject positions that are located in discourses – and so in the social sphere – in history and in culture. Subjectivity is a process of constitution and movement through already constituted positions (Mama, 1995:98).*

Our subjectivities as African youth are being constituted through highly volatile environments requiring analyses that not only engage the peculiarities of this ‘gloomy’ picture for the youth, but also examine the spaces for survival and prosperity. If our analyses of subjectivities enabled recognition of them as being multiple, dynamic and conflicted, our production of knowledge on youth cultures would be greatly enriched. Consequently, I believe there is a need to reconceptualise the meaning of youth in our region, specifically given our high HIV infection rates, astronomical unemployment rates, increased gender-based violence and the overall dismal ‘reality’ for young people. However, and perhaps more importantly, I feel there is a need to reconceptualise the epistemological construction of the concept ‘youth’. I am less concerned with the parameters holding the definition of youth: whether it is 15–35 years as defined by the African Youth Charter (African youth Charter, 2006), or any other age distinction, as defined by some political parties. That is not my primary concern. However, I do recognise that the inclusions and exclusions from a ‘youth’ bracket have very real and lived consequences for many, including access to certain services, policies and spaces. But the parameters of youth become relevant when we think about the implications on policy and practice in heavily under-resourced environments. Social grants that aim to protect young people have had a considerable impact on who has access to certain resources in some countries.

I am more concerned with the ways in which we understand the concept of youth and the lived realities that on a daily basis challenge, contort and distort this concept. I am interested in how we re-imagine the ways young people experience their lives in our region. What are we doing to stay plugged in to the multiple realities experienced by young people living in southern Africa? How do we seek to understand these realities, given the current paradigm that exists, which has produced dominant bodies of knowledge? How are we nurturing growth amongst young people? How are we learning and engaging with the youth in ways that promote a paradigm shift in our thinking of youth?

**Unpacking the concept: current paradigms**

Perhaps before we can reconceptualise the term ‘youth’ we may need to reflect upon present day constructions of youth and briefly discuss how these constructions manifest themselves in young people’s lives. The call for reconceptualising youth is necessary precisely because of the dismal ‘realities’ painted for young people, particularly in our region. These contexts are real, but I will argue that they are not complete pictures in and of themselves. I have questioned whether it is in fact possible to engage in a discussion about youth without reiterating and reinforcing the dominant notions of danger and gloom associated with youth. I had hoped to avoid reinforcing such notions...
but found myself in a discursive challenge of reimagining the concept of youth within the limitations of dominant constructions. This being said, I tread cautiously in describing the pictures of ‘gloom’ that have reigned for quite some time. In Mamphele Ramphele’s book, Steering by the Stars, she writes comprehensively about youth cultures in South Africa and provides a stepping-stone from which to re-think:

The stories in this book capture some of the struggles waged by young people of New Crossroads who are not yet benefiting from the fruits of post-Apartheid South Africa. Theirs is a life experience bearing all the scars of the legacy of the past. Inadequate social amenities. Overcrowded homes. The daily grind of poverty that undermines the dignity of ordinary citizens and makes for stressful family relationships. Underperforming schools that provide little hope for a better future for them compared to their uneducated parents. Violent homes, schools and streets that add to the general insecurity in New Crossroads, as is the case in many other Black townships. And yet these are also stories of hope – that eternal burning flame in the souls of so many who refuse to give up. (Ramphele, 2002:11)

Ramphele describes a context plagued by the numerous deficiencies experienced by young people in South Africa, propelled by poverty, all of which are relevant. Yet, again the picture is incomplete. I appreciate Ramphele drawing attention to the issues facing young people in South Africa, which is not very different from other southern African countries. Amplifying these realities is important. However, the young people’s lives she speaks about are not solely characterized by poverty. Poor young people have lives that are rich and textured, infused with meaning that goes beyond what is painted here.

‘Hope’ is a woefully incomplete strategy to conceptualise nuanced youth subjectivities. It is my hope that there are greater ways of ‘surviving’ poverty that allow us to examine and understand fuller subjectivities. In and amongst these grave conditions, young people have led and are leading engaging lives that have meaning for their multiple subjectivities. When we ignore the bigger picture, we fail to understand the meanings through which poverty and other such social and political injustices are articulated in young people’s lives.

In writing this I thought at length about spewing out statistics about the alarmingly high HIV infection rates amongst young people, or the growing unemployment rates in our region, all of which are relevant and provide colour to the environments in which we live in. However, they are not the only constructions of personhood for young people. I argue that we have become too inundated with messages of ‘gloom’ that deny our subjectivities.

Sex and sexuality is one realm (amongst others), where the notion of danger and disease have clouded a nuanced understanding of how it functions and permeates our lives as young people in the region. How do we incorporate understandings of sexuality so that they reflect motion, fluidity, exchange and negotiation, with power being central to our conceptualizing? Mumbi Machera (2004) defines sexuality as “… a social-political arena constantly reshaped through cultural, economic, familial and political relations, all of which are conditioned through prevailing social organizations of gender, race and class relationships at given points in time”. This definition allows us to think beyond the growing cloak of danger transmitted by and through HIV and AIDS. Our social, cultural and personal landscapes have been heavily marked by the growing epidemic, yet our sexualities live on as political, social and cultural productions of our identity and are also marked by pleasure. Are we unable to love and feel beyond the discourse of HIV and AIDS? When we speak about sex and sexuality is there no space to talk about pleasure in a paradigm characterized by pain and danger? Where are young people’s voices in this dialogue?

Visible but inaudible

In reconceptualising youth, it is important for us to consider the position of young people’s voices in this dialogue. How do we promote voice and articulation by the youth in real and meaningful ways, ways that go beyond tokenism and ‘ensuring we have involved at least one young person’? In order for the voices and thoughts of young people to be heard, we have to go beyond simply including young people in the dialogue. The entire discourse on youth has to be challenged; with young people being the ones to set the agenda for their issues. I have sat in many workshops and meetings where young people have been included as an afterthought, as a means of equitable representation. The inclusion of young women as equitable gender practices takes this ‘false’ representation even further. Yet the space is designed in ways that prohibit, limit and constrain young people’s voices. I am interested in how we challenge these traditional, historical and political modes of engagement, again beyond the rhetoric.

“In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.” (Lorde, 1984: 43).

Southern Africa as a geographical, historical and political location carries particular meanings of youth as embedded in our ‘traditions’ and ‘cultures’. However, these meanings are not fixed in time or space. There are collective understandings in our region about the social positioning of youth in a hierarchy that disallows or prohibits engagement in certain spaces and articulation of voice in other spaces. Youth as a transitional phase in this context requires that you ‘earn your stripes’ to gain social power in a community. I believe this has implications for the ways we conduct ourselves as young people,
beyond our immediate communities. The recognition of voice is not merely stratified across age, but can be seen across race, gender and class. I have concerns about how to amplify voices within formal and informal spaces where power is negotiated, configured, and articulated through various processes of exchange. The youth’s voices are largely absent in discussions that affect their lives.

It is important for us to think about alternative spaces for engaging as young people. Blogging as the new site for knowledge production and as part of social media may provide useful alternatives. However, due to the parameters of this paper, I will not engage further with this idea, but I do see value in examining the ways young people access alternative spaces for organising themselves.

Precisely because youth by its nature is a transitional phase and as such it is a harvesting period that begins and ends, its formulation is consistently fluid. It allows us to be fluid in our thinking and application of strategies to enhance and engage in young people’s lives. However, it has also meant that we neglect to create building blocks and legacies for those to come. For the youth who are politically and socially engaged in development work, youth advocacy is often a stepping-stone to future careers in already familiar fields. This is both important and necessary in creating social advocates who have investment in issues that affect the youth. Yet I think it is important for us not to neglect our role in creating a vibrant youth sector within civil society that is diverse. In engaging our multiple subjectivities and realities it is pertinent that the voices of young people, who are not present in public discourse, are engaged with meaningfully.

**What does it mean to be a young person in southern Africa today?**

I am not sure I can say with any clarity or certainty what it means to be young in southern Africa today, especially given that youth has been defined differently by different people – with the age ranging anything between 16 and 40! I dare not speak for young people in the region without doing serious disservice to the multiple identities and subjectivities that produce and reproduce them daily. However, I can express some of my personal experiences of being young in southern Africa, with the intention that it might provide key theoretical threads into what might be important to other young people in the region.

I am young. I am educated, employed and for the most part often scared. I live ‘on the brink’ as a young person embedded in a context that makes me nervous for my livelihood. As a young African woman I am present to the dangers that threaten me on a daily basis. I have to be careful when I am driving alone, I have to be careful when I walk alone at night or during the day. I am warned about the frequency with which human trafficking occurs. I am vulnerable because I am young and because I am a woman. I live in a region plagued by HIV and AIDS. I am ‘on the brink’ of despair and disaster. This is the context I have come to live with just like many millions of other young people in this region. Yet we find ways to survive and thrive because our subjectivities are more than just premised on danger. In this context, we love, we engage, we think, we dream. This is not intended to be whimsical or shallow but to recognize that multiple levels upon which our lives are constructed go beyond pain and danger. Though we experience those things too, there is more. Reconceptualising youth requires that we recognise more than the destruction and that we envision ways of creating societies that vibrantly celebrate our multiple subjectivities.

I am located in multiple ways – genealogically, politically and socially. I traverse several spaces through my day-to-day encounters. Negotiating my identity across these spaces is something that I think many young people can relate to through their experiences. Though I have always understood my ancestry as Zambian, I have come to learn that we have migrated over time from many different places. In search of prosperity and a desire to provide a ‘better’ life for those to come, my family (both immediate and extended) have travelled the globe, creating new constructions of Zambian and African, within a discourse of migration, development and changing notions of identity. Having to negotiate this identity in our region raises issues of belonging and exclusion, political allegiances to nation-states, and what it means to construct our identities in cultural spaces that may not be ‘home’. With all negotiations, there is often conflict.

Socially, I have come to straddle various spaces according to the requirements of the space. The ways in which youth cultures form and constitute themselves are affected by the social spheres we navigate our way through. I question the ways in which young people are creating notions of ‘success’? I often hear discussions about the many opportunities present for young people and how best to exploit those opportunities. I wonder how we, as young people, are interpreting the ideas of success and promise. I wonder to what degree we are influenced by global images of this success and prosperity? To what degree do we consume global constructions of identity that harm or benefit us as young people in the global South?

Being young in the context of HIV and AIDS in southern Africa, where the youth are most seriously impacted – especially young women – has had an enormous impact on the ways that sex and sexuality are understood and practiced. Beyond being affected by the loss of many family members to the disease, which has had a particular impact on family structures with the rise of youth-led households, the prevalence of HIV has altered the way I think about sex and sexuality in the context of danger. In a context where women’s sexualities are heavily policed, the presence of HIV and AIDS has further enhanced
the control and policing of women’s bodies. Whether it is well-meaning family members or health practitioners, there is a growing focus on women’s – particularly young women’s – sexuality.

What does it mean for young women’s access to choice over their bodies, when South Africa is the only country in the region where abortion is legal ‘without restriction as to reason’? (Guttmacher Institute, 2009). What implications does this have for how women are able to negotiate their sexual encounters, particularly in a context characterized by gender-based violence? I think these are questions we need to continue thinking about. Understanding our multiple localities is a necessary pre-condition to understanding what it means to be young in southern Africa today. Being young in southern Africa is not one subject position. It is not characterized by one experience, understanding or reality. It is fluid, dynamic and as mentioned above, often contested.

Conclusion

What am I saying about reconceptualising youth? It is long overdue and it is not complete. May we constantly engage in the exercise of reconceptualising, reimagining, and re-envisioning the concept of youth by youth. May we stay connected to those more current than ourselves, those whose lives multiply under the radar. I am excited by the passion and promise I see in between the lines. I am inspired by what is possible when we step back and allow the space for new voices to speak.

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