

Youth: Who's in - who's out?

by

Colin AJ Collett van Rooyen & Cheryl Lyn Jarman

1999

Introduction

The concept ›youth‹ lends itself to an array of interpretations and meanings. It is a diverse concept that is becoming increasingly used to describe, name or explain something or someone. As Osei-Hwedie, Mufune and Mwansa (1991:64) noted, the term ›youth‹ is one that is ambiguous with different meanings in different contexts.®

In South Africa there is ample evidence of an increase in the popular use of the term ›youth‹. Phrases such as ›the youth‹, ›our youth‹, and ›we, the youth‹, are often heard and seen both in everyday discourse and in the media. The concept is also becoming increasingly central in political discourse. ›The youth‹ are often the targets for political media (or propaganda?). Youth leagues are often strong support bases for individual politicians and for their respective parties. Policy development is also beginning to show increasing evidence of the term youth. All this often taking place in a context where no clear understanding of the term itself is evident, and where few exact definitions are provided. However, the popularity of the terms would then, perhaps suggest a universal understanding of the term and concept.

This article reports on a study which responds to a number of the above points. Its aim was to seek some clarity, even if at a modest level, regarding the understanding of this term. It does not seek to provide a universal definition - this is probably not possible, but rather explores and

presents a range of responses and in this way hopes to make a contribution to discussion towards a clearer understanding of the term.

Aims and assumptions of the study

The study aimed at establishing how people perceive and explain the concept ›youth=. It is based on the assumption that there are many different understandings of the concept, despite the almost universal use of the term. A further assumption is that people do have an opinion on how youth should be defined, and that the opinions of ordinary citizens can in some way help to gain clarity for those who direct and create policy and who provide intervention services.

Literature

Many authors have attempted to define and describe the concept ›youth=, but there has been little consensus as to the exact characteristics, or specifiers of what exactly constitutes ›youth=, as the following brief review of literature will show. Berger and Federico (1985) wrote extensively on the Life - Cycle Stages, and they identified adolescence (13 - 18 years), and young adulthood (18 - 25 years), as two different life stages, to which society has allocated specific tasks and functions.

Although now something of a dated text, the work of Ramsey is interesting. Ramsey (1967) acknowledged that the definitional process was indeed problematic, and that the words or terms ›adolescent=, ›teenager=, and ›youth= should be used interchangeably. He suggested that the words generally referred to persons between the ages of 13 - 21 years, but that the simple definition of youth in terms of age grouping was less precise than appeared on the surface, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, he said that the broad generalisations about youth or adolescence did not apply to persons who had not yet reached puberty. Puberty involves physical and developmental changes, which occur at different times for each individual. Secondly, the rate of physical

development of the individual usually differed between girls and boys. Ordinarily, Ramsey(1967) said that girls matured about two years earlier than boys, and the effects of physical maturation on the individual's social and psychological behaviour are such that the beginning period of adolescence for girls was earlier than for boys. Thirdly, Ramsey (1967) said that the definition of youth was sometimes offered on the basis of assumed universal characteristics of youth, rather than on the basis of age groupings. This assumed 'universality' relates well to the assumptions and aims of this particular study.

Richards (1997) identified the necessity of formulating an operational definition of a 'young person'. For specific purposes identified by Richards (1997) young people were defined as those between the ages of 13 - 20, although he acknowledged that the 'Western' definition of youth included young people up to the age of 25 years. Richards (1997) pointed out that within the South African context, writers often agreed that the impact of apartheid postponed the transition to adulthood for many South Africans, and that the cut-off point to define a young person should, as a result of this, be extended to 30 years.

Osei-Hwedie, Mufune and Mwansa (1994) noted that the Commonwealth and the United Nations defined youth as people between the ages of 15 and 25 years. Writing about a study conducted in Zambia, Osei-Hwedie, Mufune and Mwansa (1991) however, proposed a definition of youth as those between 10 and 33 years of age but did not provide any real rationale for this wider definition of the concept, other than the fact that the (1991) Zambian government defined youth as being between the ages of 10 and 35 years. Serote (1994) simply defined youth as a period between childhood and adulthood, characterised by enthusiasm and inexperience. This definition is possibly vague but allows flexibility and suggests some recognition of contextual factors.

In recent times, and from within a policy development framework, the National Youth Commission [NYC] (1996), defined the age of a young person as being between 14 - 35 years.

In their definition of a young person or youth, the NYC (1996) said that it should be recognised that the age range of men and women defined as being youthful was very broad. As with Richards (1997), the NYC (1996) recognised the necessity to recognise the different life circumstances and experiences which shape those who comprise this broad category. In addition, the NYC (1996), recognised the requirement to segment the age category of >youth= so as to more accurately address the issues of particular groups. For example, the issues faced by males and females aged 16 - 24 years, are likely to be quite different than those who are 28 - 35 years. In agreement with the basic assumptions of the study, the NYC (1996) note that the term >youth= has a range of meanings and connotations within the South Africa social, cultural and political context. Youth have traditionally been known in South Africa to be an important element of the struggle against apartheid, and have also been characterised as unruly, violent and undisciplined.

As the NYC. (1996) acknowledged, when defining >youth=, it is important to recognise the broader policy environment and the views of other policy documents. The following are examples:

- \$ The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997), defined a young person as a woman or man aged between 16 - 30 years.
- \$ The Child Care Act (1983), defined a child as a male or female aged between 0 - 18 years.
- \$ The National Youth Commission Act (1996), defined youth as being between 14 - 35 years.
- \$ The Constitution of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League defined youth as being between 14 - 35 years.
- \$ According to the Hague Convention on Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction Act 72 (1996), the Conventions protection ceases to apply when the child attains 16 years.

There is clearly a need for harmonisation across policies with regards to these matters of youth definition, and it is hoped that this study will stimulate discussion around the important issues of clarification, description, and definition of >youth=.

Methodology

The study is essential exploratory in nature. Elements of descriptive strategy also exist in that the study describes the responses. No hypotheses were tested and thus the classical or true experimental design was not relevant.

The study utilised the survey process to obtain data. To this effect a brief questionnaire was designed which comprised 10 short questions (including biographical data). The questionnaires were administered by research assistants who were briefed in the purpose of the study and the use of the questionnaire. These research assistants were requested to approach members of their own geographic and social communities on a convenience basis in order to obtain the data.

Research assistants came from a range of communities generally within the greater Durban area, however some gathered data in areas on the North and South coasts of KwaZulu Natal. An attempt was made to ensure that the research assistants came from communities that would reflect the wide range of characteristics of the region. While it is acknowledged that this method of data gathering and sample construction has limitations and tends to not allow for researcher control over variables, this process was deemed suitable by the researcher given the exploratory nature of the study and in order to obtain a range of opinions. A decision was taken to limit respondents to those over 18 years for both practical and content related reasons.¹ The results presented and discussed here represent the opinions of 435 citizens, and were gathered by 12 interviewers.

1

A decision to use persons 18 years and older was taken. This is a subjective decision and was taken for >convenience' purposes. There exists the possibility of further study with a sample under the age of 18 years which will provide comparative data.

Results and discussion

Respondent profile:

The respondents represented a range of ages, from 18 years of age to 90 years. The median age was 25 years, while the mean age was 29.9 years, and the mode 22 years. It is interesting to note that of the respondents within the modal category (22 year of age), 87.5% indicated that they considered themselves to be within the category >youth=. The sample represented an almost equal proportion on gender variables, with 50.3% being female and 47.7% being male.

A total of 55.6% of the sample identified themselves as being >youth=. Among this group (ie those who identified themselves as being >youth=), the median age was 23, the mode was 22 and the maximum 61. It was interesting to note the similarities between this group and the general sample (of which they were part) when it came to defining >youth=. Other than the maximum age (which was lower for the sub-sample) the central tendency indicators are identical (See Table 1), and suggests that there was a relatively solid consensual opinion across the sample.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1

Comparative indicators (in years) between general sample and those within sample who identified themselves as youth.

Indicator	Entire sample	>Youth= sub-sample
Mode	22	22
Minimum	18	18
Maximum	90	61

N=435

Table 2

Minimum (entry) and maximum (exit) ages for >youth= in years.

Indicator	Minimum	Maximum
Mean	16.87	28.12
Mode	16	21
Median	16	26
Minimum	0	13
Maximum	35	90

N=435

Minimum and maximum ages for >youth= The mean minimum age for youth was 16,8 years, while the modal category reflected a similar age, this being 16 years. A total of 69%

of the respondents saw the minimum age for youth as being between 12 and 18 years of age. This reflects well the life stage theory used by Berger and Federico (1985) who identified the life stage >adolescents= as being between 13 - 18 years.

Maximum age of >youth=: The respondents suggested that the maximum age at which a person may be perceived as >a youth= was, on average, 28 years, while the modal category was 21 years. A vast majority of the sample saw the maximum age for youth being between 21 and 35 years (73%). It is perhaps socially significant that these ages be so prevalent given that both have social and economic relevance; 21 being the >popular= age often accepted as representative of attaining adulthood and independence, and 35 being something of a media or marketing driven category, often, in South Africa at least, being used as the >cut off= age for scholarship/bursary applications for >young= students/researchers, for airfare discounts and other similar >market= based youth privileges. The point made by Richards (1997) concerning the >extension= of the upper limits of youth age parameters as a result of soci-political circumstances in the South African context seems to be verified by this data, given the regular recording of 35 as the upper limit for youth. This upper limit is also in line with the ANC Youth League's definition of youth.

Life stages prior to and after >youth=: Here respondents were required to provide their opinion on how they named people in life stages prior to and after >youth=. The modal responses here were >children= (51.5%) prior to youth, and >adult/young adult (84.5%) after >youth=. This is interesting as it suggests that the term >youth= has become a replacement or synonym for >teenage=. Serote's (1994) opinion that youth represents a phase between childhood and adulthood has direct relevance here and is clearly supported by the findings.

Social identifiers of >youth=: Movements into and out of this category (>youth=) were an area of interest, specifically in terms of perceived reasons for these movements. The data indicated that perceived changes in levels of behavioural/social maturity were the modal categories for both the movements into the category of youth (15%), and out of the category (19%).

Implications of findings

The process of more detailed analysis is ongoing. It is anticipated that the findings will be used to inform policy initiatives or policy making bodies/persons. Further analysis of data gathered from political parties related to their definitions of >youth= would add value to the study and once these have been analysed the results will be distributed to political parties/political leaders, and selected community leaders.

Further research could focus on the following specific areas:

- Documenting the responses to the findings (if any) by political parties, government departments, and service organisations, and establishing their recommendations as to further action/research.**
- Exploratory research into other variables used in defining the concept >youth=, in order to obtain a picture that is broader than age-related determinants.**
- The sharing the data with >youth organisations= and the documentation of their response to the data.**
- Specific research using participants who fall within the categories identified through the findings of the study in order to further explore issues related to their own self identity.**

Conclusion

The study has confirmed to some extent, the varying definitions and understandings of youth. In Some cases there is congruence between policy related definitions and public opinion, while in other cases there is evidence of a need for further exploration and development of the debate that will allow for a more comprehensive and mutually beneficial understanding of the concept.

Public definitions of concepts such as >youth= are important to establish for a number of reasons. Firstly, incongruence between public and political/policy based definitions lead to potential misunderstandings and misdirection of services. A further issue of importance is that definitions gained through public opinion allow for an understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Often no explicit or tacit statement or rationale for processes of inclusion or exclusion are provided when actions by the public/community become problematic. Surveying these opinions opened windows of understanding that may facilitate greater congruence between policy makers, service providers and the general public or specific communities. Knowing who is >in= and who is >out= when it comes to defining and offering services to youth is important, both for youth and those who offer the services and make the policies that impact on their lives.

References

BERGER, R. L., & FEDERICO, R. C. (1985). *Human Behaviour: A perspective for the helping professions*, Longman, New York.

NATIONAL YOUTH COMMISSION (1996). *National Youth Policy*, Government of the Republic of South Africa, http://yis.co.za/nyc/policy/nyc/nyc_policy.htm 11 December 1998.

OSEI-HWEDI, K., MUFUNE, P. & MWANSA L-K (1991). >Work attitudes and life goals of
Zambian youth=, *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, Vol 6, No. 1.

RAMSEY, C. (1967) *Problems of youth - Social Problems Perspective*, Dickenson Publishing,
California.

RICHARDS, R. (1997). >How the contest was run= in Moller, V., Leggett, T. & Richards, R.
(Eds). *My life in the new South Africa: a youth perspective*, HSRC Press, Pretoria.

SEROTE, R. (1994). >Youth and AIDS in the Township=, in Proceedings, *Ist all African
Conference and 9th Biennial Conference of the National Association of Child Care Workers -
1994*, South Africa.

Author's Note:

This paper has appeared in : Conference Proceedings – Joint Conference AASW,
IFSW APASWE AASWWE – Promoting Inclusion – Redressing Exclusion.
Brisbane, Australia, 26-29 September 1999. p249 (vol 1) and an earlier version was
presented at the conference above.