

## 1 Introduction

In the course of 2001, the South African Broadcast Corporation, South Africa's public broadcaster, screened the second part of a television series aimed at the youth market called *Yizo, Yizo*. As with its first iteration, the series was a runaway success among young black people. Older people, on the other hand, particularly the religious community and segments of the political world, were outraged. They found the explicit sexual abuse, rape and the violence presented in the series offensive and degrading. Young people's responses were that what was being shown was what their everyday lives were all about.

Many commentators were to agree that the series was provocative and did indeed raise the difficult issues of what a public broadcaster ought to be airing, the issues of censorship and a whole host of other questions. There was little question though about the reality that *Yizo, Yizo* sought to portray. Graeme Simpson, the Director for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg argued:

*Yizo, Yizo* ... presents a challenge to those who romanticise youth politics and identity in our country, largely by reference to statistics that reassure about the values, culture and social commitment of many young people, but which hide from view the size of the youth community who are in fact at risk (*The Sunday Independent* 2001).

The dimensions of this risk are now well known. Recent surveys carried out by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation in 2002 among a random sample of 2,000 respondents aged 12–17 years – the South African National Youth Survey (SANYS) (2000) – and the ambitious Barbarin and Richter (2001) study of almost 2,800 children born in the first half of 1990 in the Soweto–Johannesburg area, illustrate many of the issues of which Simpson is speaking. The issues have also been extensively canvassed in special issues of the *Development Update* (2000), a journal of the South African National NGO Coalition and Interfund.

This article seeks to understand the circumstances of what one might call 'growing up' in South Africa. In the first part, it looks at some features of youth life in South Africa and attempts to understand the

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socio-economic forces behind these features. In the second part, it looks at youth responses to the context in which they find themselves. Drawing together the two parts, the article makes the argument that growing up in South Africa is for most a journey of a dream denied, if not betrayed. Inspired by the vision of the new South Africa, their hope and faith is tested each day as they and their parents struggle to make ends meet.

## **2 The nature of youth inequality in South Africa**

Much of the data in the section that follows is drawn from SANYS and the Barbarin and Richter study. The studies bring together a range of statistics and profiles, which clearly show the nature and complexity of youth life in South Africa. They start off by showing how young the South African population is. More than 40 per cent of South Africans are under the age of 15 (SANYS 2000) and more than 20 per cent are between the ages of 1 and 10 (Barbarin and Richter 2001).

The studies (especially SANYS 2000) also show that while young people spend a great deal of time, like many young people elsewhere in the world, playing sport, being with their friends, watching television, and going to church, for a large number of them poverty is an unavoidable reality which looms large in their lives. Approximately one-third of all young South Africans live in households with an income of under R1,000 per month. Most of these young people are African and coloured (30 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively of the young people in this category). Only 6 per cent of young Indians and no whites reported experiencing this level of poverty. One third (32 per cent) of African young people reported that they had been hungry for longer than a day and a night. Many African young people live in homes that lack basic amenities. One-third do not have access to electricity and six out of ten do not have flush toilets. Only 17 per cent have access to running water and as many as 51 per cent live in homes occupied by six people or more. The majority (65 per cent) of young Africans do not have their own bedrooms (SANYS 2000).

Their educational experiences are similarly configured. South Africa has a literacy rate

(measured as a Grade 5 education or more) of 55 per cent across the entire population. The rate among Africans is 52 per cent, as opposed to 75 per cent among whites. While 63 per cent of whites graduate from high schools (Grade 12), the corresponding figure for Africans is only 11 per cent, even though they make up 79 per cent of the whole population. Distressingly, very few of these graduates, white or black, find jobs after school. Studies conducted during the early 1990s showed that fewer than 10 per cent of matriculated students were actually finding employment in their first year after leaving school (Bundy 1992: 3).

While the South African Schools Act of 1996 makes education compulsory, it remains an indictment of the new South Africa that so many young people still never make it to school. Estimates of the out-of-school problem vary. While the estimation of the number of children who are currently not in school who ought to be there varies between 50,000 to 100,000, out of a possible school-going population of 12.5 million children, it is clear that there are almost 10,000 children who have taken to the streets (McCafferty 2001: 9). The quality of many schools, moreover, leaves much to be desired. Many schools continue not to have adequate facilities such as water, electricity, fully trained staff and so on. In 1996, 24 per cent of schools in the country were without access of any kind to water (South African Institute of Race Relations 1998: 149). One can safely assume that all of these schools were black. Their health status also reflected the country's racial make-up. The Barbarin and Richter (2001: 108) study made clear that the majority of children manifested problems that were typical of children in developing countries. A very high percentage (over 50 per cent) experienced in their first two years symptoms of coryza and close to 30 per cent had bouts of diarrhoea. One in four children carry HIV infection status.

Two issues, which reflect the inequality of schooling for young people, are worth emphasising. At the higher end of the school process, it remains a reality that schools continue to fail the bulk of young people. Provinces with large majority African populations, such as the Eastern Cape and the Northern province continue to have fewer than half of their children pass the

matriculation examination (Grade 12). In 1997, only 45 per cent of the high school learners passed this crucial examination, while the corresponding figure for the Northern Province (now called Limpopo) was only 32 per cent. By contrast, a relatively wealthy province like the Western Cape, with a relatively small number of African Grade 12 entrants for the matriculation examination had a pass rate of over 76 per cent. While school enrolments are no longer collected on a racial basis, these figures clearly demonstrate that it is African children who are failing.

At the initial point of schooling, significant stresses are being experienced too. A total of 1 per cent of the children surveyed in the sample were pushed into the schools early, some as early as four years old, by their parents, essentially because schools were being used as child-minding facilities. The result was that many children failed their first year at school. Barbarin and Richter (2001: 270) report that 'most of these early-age children were so underage that they could not stay awake for the full school morning and fell asleep in the classroom'. The National Department of Education has recently committed itself to providing proper facilities for these children in a reception class. It has, however, made few preparations, particularly with respect to teacher-training, for this development.

Working with the age group 0–10, the Barbarin and Richter (2001: 3) study, conducted over an eight-year period in the closing years of the 1990s, makes the point that 'an intolerable number of South African children live in such dire straits that, like Issak (a three-year-old child whose father, driven to despair by poverty, hunger and want, first hanged the child and then himself), they lack the resources to provide for themselves ready access to such basic necessities as shelter, food and water'.

In attempting to understand why this picture is as it is, some consideration needs to be made of the quality of family life in South Africa. Family life for many is directly shaped by the nature of the South African economy, and, as is apparent, by the increasing reach of HIV/AIDS into families. Where families have been struck down by the virus, both healthy and infected children are having to assume large responsibilities for bringing up their families. While the incidences are as yet unclear, stories of

children as young as ten having to take responsibility for the care and bringing-up of their younger siblings are no longer rare.

Fathers are absent in many homes. A study conducted of family life in Cape Town by the Cape Metropolitan Council (2001) discovered that whereas there were 120 older people for every 100 children in the white parts of Cape Town, in the African parts of the city, that ratio had fallen to 10:100. Barbarin and Richter (2001: 155) explain that the family is the most significant determinant of the quality of care and the adequacy of psychological resources available to a child. Family structure in the South African situation, however, produces decidedly ambiguous results. In the majority of African households, either mothers were not married to their fathers, or did not have fathers living in the same house as mothers. Mothers carried the burden of raising their children. The presence of male figures in these homes is, however, not an unalloyed good. The Barbarin and Richter (2001: 158) study discovered that homes in which the mother had a male partner were very much more likely to produce greater hardship for children. Children were more likely to experience hunger when a male partner was present than when he was absent. Much of this, of course, is directly related to socio-economic class and, one might suggest, would not be replicated in middle-class families. Moreover, as the Barbarin and Richter work (2001: 163–8) makes clear, when families operate effectively, they moderate many of the stress factors which young people experience, particularly those of poverty, violence and even racism. Hungry children were more depressed and more anxious. On the other hand, providing a peaceful, non-violent environment in which young people could grow up correlated strongly with children's manifestations of emotional and other disorders. Families that themselves showed a predisposition to aggression to solving problems tended to have children who were more likely to be alienated and themselves aggressive.

Important about the Barbarin and Richter study is their emphasis on the social forces responsible for producing the kinds of families in which young people grow up. They make the argument that racism, urbanisation and modernisation are at the heart of the character of South Africa's youth and

their identity. For white children, and increasingly, middle-class black (African, coloured and Indian) children, growing up is little different to the experience that young middle-class people experience in other parts of the world. They are, for the most part, chaperoned, mentored, guided and consciously moulded by parents and schools. Parents and schools invest immense resources in their upbringing. The opposite pertains to the majority of other children where the capacity for supervision and the care has been severely eroded. Barbarin and Richter make the point that these forces directly impact on family composition relationships and task performance. Family life, they conclude, where it is effective, buffers them from the stresses of racism. In effective families, children are provided the resources with which to adapt and cope. Modernisation and urbanisation too, have had the effect of re-configuring family structures, eroding the extended family and the ability of communal structures to maintain practices of sharing. Migratory labour and high male unemployment figures have also led to reduced feelings of commitment on the parts of fathers. In these situations, it is often single mothers and frequently grandmothers, who have had to step into the breach. As Barbarin and Richter (2001: 171) say:

In some cases, adaptation to imperatives of modern urban living has sharpened families' ability to cope with the stress of poverty and to provide nurturing and protection to their children. In other cases, the consequences have been less felicitous, as evidenced in rising reports of alcoholism, domestic violence, sexual abuse, parents abandoning their children, and children taking to the streets to run away from the pain of family life.

The essential conclusion to which they come is that stressed families produce emotionally and cognitively stressed children. The majority of children and young people in South Africa are growing up hardened by their circumstances. Their circumstances appear to have conditioned them to manage adversity and strain. Barbarin and Richter (2001: 174) graphically describe the face of poverty in South Africa in the following way:

Poverty has many faces in South Africa. One of them is Dumisane, who goes to school with

hunger pangs. Another is Tina who must stay home from school until her mother can afford to buy her school uniforms. And Michael, who shares a one-room shack with his mother and four siblings, unbearably cold in the winter and swelteringly hot in the summer, with no space to play or study. The face of poverty is Mandisa, whose breakfast of white bread and tea may be the only food for the day if her father is not fortunate enough to be picked by one of the contractors who drives to the edge of the township looking for cheap day labourers. It is Ishmael, for whom dreams of toys, books, electricity, and an indoor toilet are out of reach. It is Tsepo, whose parents worry about where they will find money for his grandmother's funeral.

### 3 Youth attitudes

Given the quality of life experienced by these young people, it is not surprising that young people in South Africa have had to mature quickly. In this section, an attempt is made to present some sense of how young people are themselves responding to their surroundings. The approach the discussion takes is that young people are working (in a cognitive sense) with the conditions of growing up. Far from being the subjects, and in some senses passive victims, of the structural forces that surround them, they are in an active dialogue with these conditions. They are making choices and taking decisions. These decisions are profoundly complex, but they reflect the identity complexities, which the process of socialisation is producing among youth in the country.

The discussion begins with a broadstroke discussion of young people's positions with respect to the major issues in the country and then moves on to consider their attitudes to the new South Africa.

The SANYS (2000) showed, interestingly, that the majority of young people (59 per cent) say that they are very happy with their lives personally, while a further 29 per cent said that they were quite happy. While one out of ten said that they were neither happy nor unhappy, a very small number (3 per cent) said that they were quite or very unhappy. These statistics are important, because they represent a marked move away from

the extraordinarily high levels of depression and suicidalness reported during the turbulent years of the 1980s.

When asked to speak of their five greatest worries and fears, young people reported that these were crime, HIV/AIDS and child abuse. A majority also expressed anxiety about drugs and teenage pregnancy. Other issues, which drew large numbers of responses, included education, violence, unemployment and poverty. A majority of the young people surveyed (62 per cent) reported that child abuse was a major concern for them. Girls were more likely to talk of abuse as a concern than boys and young white respondents were less concerned about abuse than their African, coloured and Indian peers. African and coloured children reported relatively high levels of being beaten by their teachers at school (38 per cent and 29 per cent). Overall, 29 per cent of the sample reported of being beaten by their parents. Young people living in low-income homes were more likely to report of being beaten than those from homes where families had incomes of over R1,000 (42 per cent as opposed to 24 per cent). Significantly, many young people were also becoming sexually active at relatively young ages. Over 31 per cent of the cohort surveyed reported of being sexually active, with slightly fewer girls (28 per cent) than boys (33 per cent) reporting of being sexually experienced. A total of 14 per cent of sexually experienced young people have been pregnant or made someone else pregnant. Overall, 4 per cent of all young South Africans between the ages of 12 and 17 reported having been pregnant or having made someone else pregnant. Significantly, almost four in ten sexually experienced girls reported that they had been forced to have sex against their will. A total of 7 per cent of sexually experienced boys made the same claim. Given these statistics and what the current rates of HIV infection are, more than 50 per cent of South Africans under the age of 15 could die of AIDS-related illnesses in the next five to ten years (SANYS 2000).

This brief profile makes clear the complex attitudes among young South Africans. But it is necessary to look more finely at the ways in which they construct their arguments about themselves and each other. The discussion draws on literature about youth narratives and an extensive data bank

of interviews conducted with young people over a period of ten years. What this data shows clearly is how, over the past ten years, young South Africans have grappled with the complexity of living in South Africa, and facing the enormity of the transition from apartheid to democracy have shifted their preoccupations from the hard and racialised realities of the early 1990s to the equally hard, but alluring world of the globalisation era.

Illustrating the state of the South African situation in the early 1990s, Pam Christie (1990), drawing on extensive interviews with students, sought to write about their opinions on important issues of the day. The students in these studies show astuteness in their assessments of matters such as race, gender and class. Her work confirms much of the macro-inspired theory about race, that young people have been influenced by the racial messages of the curriculum and the broader society of which they are part. Christie (1990) says:

In the analysis of open school pupils' responses, race presented the most consistently significant differences. Regardless of gender or 'ethnicity', black pupils were consistently and significantly more opposed to the existing racial hegemony than white pupils were, and more in favour of the form of social change depicted in the broad political factor. In the context of apartheid, it is not surprising that race is a major subjectivity in South Africa.

The strength and consistency of differences between black and white open school pupils illustrate the pervasiveness of racial hegemony in South Africa. The prominence of racial differences bears witness to a racial consciousness so intimately present that race may be regarded, in Gramsci's terms, as organic in the historical development of South Africa.

Gaganakis' (1991) work confirms how strong 'race' is in how students construct their identities and their attitudes of people who are different to themselves. Talking of black students at private schools, she says, "Being black"... emerged as the most salient category by which blacks located themselves' (Gaganakis 1991: 79). Straker's (1992: 115) work takes this further and describes and analyses the effects of racial polarisation in South

Africa. She shows, for example, how the rigid lines of demarcation between white and black were responsible for instilling in young people anxiety and even intolerance for non-conformism. She talks of the intolerance of young African men and women she had interviewed for peers who sought to be different politically and culturally. In situations characterised by strife, 'strict conformity becomes the yardstick used by communities to distinguish friends from foes' (Straker 1992: 115). Difference comes to be perceived as a punishable offence. While 'political deviance' is the issue which she uses to illustrate her point, she argues that race has the same salience in defining who falls inside and outside of one's boundary. Anything outside the boundary is indicative of membership of the out-group, who, by definition 'are enemies and to that extent can be justifiably attacked' (Straker 1992: 116).

Premised by similar concerns about the impact of apartheid, the work of Dawes and Finchilescu (1993), an extensive qualitative and quantitative investigation of the social orientations and racial attitudes of adolescents from different communities, is especially important. The significance of this work is its confirmation of the real effects apartheid has had on the way in which young people conceive of themselves, of other young people and of their broader social environment. Describing some of the results of their study, Dawes and Finchilescu (1993: 37) remarked that '(a)partheid or "colour" labels ... appear to have high salience' among the students.

An important index of the success of the South African system of apartheid which, to be fair, has its roots in the longer history of white supremacy in South Africa, is the hardness of the boundaries young South Africans construct around their identities. In the Dawes and Finchilescu (1993) study, each of the statutorily defined groups, Africans, coloureds, whites and Indians, manifested high levels of preference for the respective racial descriptors assumed to apply to them. Even where young people chose to describe themselves as South African, the interviewers in the project were reluctant to interpret this expression as one of social solidarity, seeing it instead as the use of the term in its narrowly separate and racialised forms, embedded in which are impulses of a profound *othering* inclination. Even more

interestingly, people officially classified as coloured, 'coloured' being a term used with the greatest of delicacy because of its rejection in progressive circles, themselves preferred the descriptor. Predictably, following this trend, the term 'African' is used infrequently by people classified white and coloured and not at all by those classified Indian. Even the term 'South African' is used by only 25–30 per cent of each of the groups they studied. When children classified white were asked to describe their nation, they most frequently put white. Similarly, black or African subjects hardly ever referred to themselves as 'South African', preferring to refer to themselves as the 'Black Nation'. In contrast to recent political trends where people of colour and other South Africans – associated with progressive organisations – have used the term 'black' as a collective term, coloured and Indian children very infrequently identified themselves as black.

Illustrating this hardness of identity, Dawes and Finchilescu (1993: 42) quote two students, one an Afrikaner from a middle-class background and another a 16–17-year-old black subject from a small town. The subject classified white says (original in Afrikaans and unedited):

I am part of the Afrikaner nation which stands for its rights. I am white. I think the nation and the country is in a mess. Why should blacks and whites live together? Why was F.W. De Klerk chosen as State President? Why was Nelson Mandela released? De Klerk has allowed them to take over the country and to do with it what they have done elsewhere, break everything and burn everything. This South Africa does not have a future! PS The new South Africa stinks!

The Black child puts it not very differently (again unedited):

I am an African from South Africa; a black African who have cried and fought for many years for my country. We Africans are the only suffering nation. This is our land not the whites. People of South Africa it is time for peace.... Oh Africans how long are we going to suffer in our land. Imagine in our own land. Why! Why we blacks. Why not whites why not

coloured why not the slams [Muslims] or any other nation.

A research assistant on the Dawes and Finchilescu (1993: 45) study commented on essays about the 'Nation' written from a white school: '(t)hese were the most blatantly racist essays I saw ... it was not uncommon to come across the sentiment that we should either just let all black people fight it out among themselves, or we should line them up against the wall and shoot the lot'.

Significantly, however, when South Africa enters the new millennium, race continues to be a major signifier in young people's lives, but it is mediated through the complex symbolism and experience of globalisation. Managing one's life in the twenty-first century is for many young people, as the first section makes clear, hardly different in material terms to how one lived in the dying days of the apartheid era. But young people are extremely conscious of living in a world where the imperatives of the market, of managing one's individuality, of 'making it', and of their rights as a consumer loom large. Recent polls (Unilever Institute 2002) show that the young South Africans have entered the global world. Due to the media, travel (particularly white young South Africans), communication, and the Internet, they are in touch with global cultures, religions, fashion and music. Their music, their tastes are fundamentally internationalised, and they are aware of how much this is the case. A young student in Cape Town, interviewed in 2000, explained in response to what 'her culture' was:

I think it's a mixture, it's like I'm going through things, I'm just borrowing. I feel that I should try and be as unique as I want to be. You know I don't want ... to be the stereotype of a coloured person who goes to clubs with coloured people ... I'm into the alternative types of music.

As the work of Kapp (2000) makes clear, the desires of young African young people, particularly their preference for English over their home languages, is shaped by the awareness that they live in an internationalised world. Mgxashe (2000: 11), writing about youth in the new millennium, says that there is a conscious debate taking place among many African youth about their exposure to

'foreign' cultures. He quotes a young woman called Lindi Jordan who says:

when we start talking about the African Renaissance we are not necessarily talking about living strictly in accordance with our traditional values ... we are more bent towards African values which are a kind of hybrid of all our exposures and experiences (Mgxashe 2000: 11).

Young people are, moreover, entering the globalised world strongly conscious of themselves as individuals. While, interestingly, there is a retention among young African men and women of the importance of tradition (SANYS 2000), there is, simultaneously, a distrust of the value of the old – a cynicism of the wisdom of the 'ancients'. This cynicism does imply an ambiguity about their identities and the extent to which clan and group affiliations impinge on their freedom as individuals. But they feel that they can as individuals achieve in the modern world. They are to be sure, politically disillusioned. Many young South Africans are anxious about politicians and distrustful of the new government. They look at their living conditions and the promises that politicians have made and are extremely sceptical. The number who used their right to the franchise in the recent 1999 elections fell to 48 per cent (Garson 2001). Their response to this is to look at other mechanisms for mobilising opportunity. The self is one.

Partly as a result of affirmative action, some young blacks feel that the new South Africa offers previously undreamed-of opportunities. In the urban areas, it is the corporate world and the allure of the corporate identity that structures their dreams and aspirations (Unilever Institute 2002). For young white people, it is the route of entrepreneurship that is the only possible way forward. Money is essential to young South African adults as the facilitator of the good life, and as the key to demonstrating status.

Even in the rural world, as the deeply interesting work of Ngwane (2002) shows, the development of new cultural forms and styles amongst African youth is even more emphatic. He talks of how young men leaving the city to go to the rural areas

for initiation ceremonies are using their education to displace older more oral-based traditions and practices during initiation. In these situations, young men are rejecting the tradition of their elders as the traditions of what they call 'the ignorant' and are investing them with new forms of masculinity, based on the ability to argue and reason. It is one's individual prowess as an 'amagent' or a street-smart young man that has come to count and not the older rites of passage defined by older people. This is an important development in the modernisation equation and shows young people moving towards a greater sense of themselves and their ability to control their own destinies. The shape of their world is filled with themselves as individuals making their own way on the backs of their efforts. Their way forward is not so much as Xhosas, Zulus, or Shangaans, but as individuals. The shift towards individualised identities within what remain heavily encoded group racialised spaces is important and calls for much more intensive study. But what is critical is that many of the spaces inhabited by young people, particularly those thought to be heavily invested with the identity of an 'authentic Africa'; what it means to be modern has clearly fractured the safety of tradition which many thought was beyond the reach of Western ways. Nolita, a young woman from Langa, an African township in Cape Town, interviewed late in 2000, commented that living in the city placed a heavy strain on young people's sense of being African 'because they don't care. They just throw away their traditions'. The point, however, is not that young people are throwing away their traditions, but that they are remaking them.

This remaking is, of course, also not without its risks. The Unilever Institute (2002) study makes clear that there is an explosion of experimentation among young people. The study, somewhat glibly, talks of the breakdown of societal rules and argues that this has come to mean that young adults have infinite options from which to construct their lives and that what distinguishes young people in the new millennium from their counterparts of the late 1980s and early 1990s is their emphasis on experimentation, rather than rebellion. The Unilever Institute study claims, to illustrate the

point, that despite being frightened of AIDS, 'the youth are still reckless in their behaviour, particularly under the influence of alcohol or drugs' (Unilever Institute 2002). Somewhat exaggerated as this may be, giving as it does to young people freedoms that they do not have, except of course in qualified ways, it is nonetheless true that young people are working hard at making their identities. They are doing so in the shopping malls of the cities, in the shebeens in the townships and the clubs in the suburbs. But they are also in institutions, such as churches and schools where the negotiations they are making about their identities are more predictable and contained. These young people, however, all live in the same larger world. One needs to recognise, therefore, that fired up by the imperatives of the globalised world as young people are, they remain connected to their mothers, fathers and associates, many of whom still stand with their feet in older ways of doing things.

What might one conclude from this?

Today, as the Unilever Institute (2002) study says, youth live in an environment where many of the core assumptions and themes governing society are in question and are breaking down '[c]ertainty has been replaced by uncertainty and the speed of change is accelerating constantly. Moral authority is no longer clear and values and traditions are in flux. Global and local ideologies are increasingly interwoven. In essence, South African youth identity is under construction'. As they seek to construct their identities, however, the world around them presents itself as fragile, hard to decipher and often inaccessible. They are called upon to take responsibilities that their predecessors were spared. In looking at these complexities, it has to be recognised that much more study and attention needs to be given to understanding how young people grow up and the approaches that are to be taken in public life (and in the private spaces of the home) to dealing with young people's futures, their rights and thinking about ways of soliciting their participation as citizens in a modern world. Called for are policies that are alert to this complexity.

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