Adversities that Disrupt Positive Development among Emerging Adult Students in Universities in Cameroon
A conceptual review

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is universally applauded as a means to empower young people with skills, knowledge, experiences and significant relationships which can enable them to play their roles successfully as leaders of tomorrow. Psychologically, one group of persons who are overwhelmingly concerned in the quest for further knowledge are emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is now a globally recognised period of human development as transition to adulthood is delayed based on issues such as young people getting married late, continuous efforts to acquire higher credentials so as to be better equipped for the labour market. As they transition from home to the university and to the world of work more so in the third decade of life, many challenges often stand on their way with the capacity of preventing them from progressing successfully and transitioning productively into adulthood. Notably academic palavers, financial hurdles, sudden independence and freedom from parental control, identity issues as well as socio-political tensions commonly seen in developing societies like Cameroon abound. The foregoing constitutes a barrier that makes university studies unbearable to some emerging adults in universities. Developmental literature on this phase of life equally depicts a hopeless situation for young adults. Also, media reports, observations and stories or experiences from some parents and families as well as the society at large reveals increase fears and anxiety on the state and future of university students as leaders of tomorrow. With these, the prospects for positive development in later life stages like adulthood are slim with huge possibilities of floundering and discontinuity for some of them. This paper highlights some of the key issues that university students in Cameroon battle with as well as the environmental socio-political trivialities that worsen the scenario.

KEYWORDS: Adversity, emerging adulthood, positive development

1. INRODUCTION

The tertiary education sector has seen a massive expansion over the past decades. It generates significant and multiple direct, indirect and catalytic economic impacts such as human capital, research, innovation and trade promotion which result in well-established benefits pertaining to both individuals and wider economies (Going Global, 2012). This growth is equally witnessed in Cameroon with about 300,000 students in the third decade of their lives enrolled in both state and private universities (Ministry of Higher Education-MINESUP, 2017) where they seek to acquire knowledge, skills and experiences academically, professionally and morally.

Research further reveals that as part of young adult's explorations and in order to establish flourishing adulthoods, there has been dramatic increase in the number of youth seeking post-high school education, which is required for success as the economy transitions to more industrial and even to information-based economies (Rifkin, 2011). Kumari & Gartia (2012) suggested that university students can be of great benefit to society by educating future generations with their acquired knowledge.

However, stagnation of wages for low-skilled workers and the lack of work opportunities for youth and young adults, combined with the increased costs of education and independent living, have made the pathway to independence and adulthood prolonged, complex, and varied, creating a new stage in the life course that has been labelled emerging adulthood (Wood, Crapnell, Lau, Bennett, Lotstein, Ferris, and Kuo, 2018). Observations and eye witness accounts parrot cries of victimization from emerging adults, parents, families, faculty staff and the society at large which suggest that the transition to and adaptation in the university during the third decade of life in Cameroon is tough, burdensome and full of risks.

This reflect an assertion by Stallman (2010) that some young people in university suffer from panic, anxiety disorders and even suicidal ideation more than the general population. Added to these, emerging adult students in Cameroon like other youth in the Africa are soaked into precarious situations since their vision for adulthood is ill-fated by difficult economic, social, political, cultural, health and psychological conditions that have diminished their hope of a successful future as adults (Lo-oh, 2012). Coupled with

these are identity issues as Arnett (2004) posited that this phase of life constitutes a fraught passage marred by complicated and difficult identity issues which make floundering inevitable for them.

The Concept of Emerging Adulthood
Individuals between 18 and 25 years of age are increasingly considered to be in a developmental stage called emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). It is a period when individuals are not adolescents but are not yet fully adults. The adjustment from adolescence to young adulthood frequently referred to as the period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2013) and the transition itself as "youth transitions" (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013). Emerging adulthood is a time to explore careers, self-identity, and commitments. As they experiment, emerging adults often get their first taste of real independent achievement and of disappointment. (Arnett, 2004; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005).

Emerging Adults in University Contexts
There is an increase in numbers of emerging adults pursuing post-secondary education (Arnett, 2004), in Cameroon the university population has increased tremendously registering more than 200,000 students thus forcing university neighbourhoods to become congested (Lo-oh & Afumbom, 2017). As such understanding factors that influence wellbeing specifically in university students is an important goal. For example, with this transition come shifts in vocational expectations, social relationships, and financial constraints, causing students to report high levels of stress (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2004; Monk, 2004). Many university students report that their academic demands are very difficult to handle with high levels of anxiety and depression (Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams, & Glazebrook, 2013).

In Cameroon observations reveal that the troubles that confront young people are numerous. Like elsewhere in the world, the quest for youth empowerment through university education has led to an unprecedented increase in university student enrolment. The rate of mobility from home to school has sparked a migration ascension which has in turn transformed university neighbourhoods into overpopulated zones. As observed, there seems to be a change in status from dependent lads under home care to independent big boys and girls with benefits such as freedom and individually controlled shelter and accommodation in hostels and bungalows.

Transition from home to university introduces more opportunities for friendships, peer relationships, learning new behaviours and life styles as well as novel experiences around the new environment commonly shared by other youths (Lo-oh & Afumbom, 2017). The situation in most cases is often worsened by the absence of parental control which has provoked the occurrence of more anti-social behaviours. This reflects Carstens (2013) who posited that there is a widespread belief that antisocial behaviour among young people particularly university students has reached a historically unprecedented height.

Evidence based observations reveal increase in fears by parents, staff, clergy, civil society, students themselves and local administrators' who have jointly engaged in continuous efforts to curb the spread of such immoral acts Lo-oh & Afumbom (2017) in order to sanitize the university

neighbourhoods in Cameroon so as to accord it the moral and academic status it deserves.

However, young people seem to be carried away by the presence of bars, night clubs, drinking spots, gambling outlets and youth funded nocturnal parties and social gatherings which spice the vicinity of student hostels with melodious rhythms as well as half naked dressing from latest musical genres from the west. This is in line with Foxcroft, Ireland, Lister-Sharp, Lowe, & Breen (2003) who indicated that there is hazardous alcohol consumption among young people, especially students (Pasch, Perry, Stigler, & Komro, 2009).

Additionally, scholars have argued that not only do students drink more alcohol than non-student populations (Kypri, Langley, & Stephenson, 2005), but that they also use other drugs and this leads to many problems and disruptive behaviours amongst this group. For example, Dawson, Grant, Stinson, & Chou (2004) revealed that students drank heavier than their non-students counterparts while Caldeira, Arria, O'Grady, Vincent, & Wish (2008) reported other drug-related disorders among this group which have been considered in this paper as acts of indiscipline such as forceful sexual behaviour, violent fights, and misappropriation of pocket money as well as school fees among others.

Ruberu (2003) earlier acknowledged that morality in universities had deteriorated to such an extent that it tends to become the accepted norm. This partially explains Giroux's (1997) claim that youth are no longer at-risk, but are actually the risk. From a psychological point of view as propounded by Giroux (1997), the contemporary neighbourhood settings and environment where most youth group together is certainly not the right environment where they can be groomed to and nurtured to maturity intellectually and academically. Concerned about the situation, Lo-oh & Afumbom (2017) argued that the foregoing practices are negative, begging for concerns of worry by the broader society.

Emerging adulthood in African contexts
Nsamenang (2002) argued that the African world view conceives of youth as growing out of childhood and poised for an adulthood that lies in the future. In his theorizations on social ontogeny he described young people as a "way station" between social apprenticeship in childhood and full social integration into the third decade of life, beginning with social entre a brief transitional period that marks the beginning of adulthood (Nsamenang, 2002; Serpell, 1994).

Some scholars argue that the delay in the adoption of adult roles means that adolescence is being extended (Nsamenang, 2002) with corresponding postponement of important life-course events. In the Africa sub region in general and Cameroon in particular, the transition to adulthood is an arduous task characterized by several challenges (Lo-oh, 2009). Social and economic inequalities in the African continent continue to mark the challenges of Africa's youth life courses (Lo-oh, 2016). Notably, in Cameroon, health care services, economic resources, and social services are unevenly distributed. As a result majority of Cameroonian youth are left languishing in abject poverty, unemployment, under scholarization, and a difficult labour market economy (Lo-oh, 2017).

Also, children are born before marriage; education and employment alternate; and jobs paying enough to support a family increasingly require more formal education. As a result young people today remain in school longer to acquire the credentials they will need to support a family. Again, child bearing in contemporary Cameroon before marriage is common and schooling after unskilled labour or work is equally normal. Lo-oh and Monju (2018) found that children work and school at the same time as way to empower themselves economically thus they gain life skills that support them in later stages of life. Issues of this nature shape the way youths describe the transition from emerging adulthood to adulthood in Cameroon (Lo-oh, 2016)

The Concept of Adversity

Adversity refers to negative contexts and experiences that have the potential to disrupt or challenge adaptive functioning and development (Obradovi´c, Shaffer, & Masten, 2012). The concept of adversity has been defined as the experience of hardship or suffering associated with trauma, distress, difficulty or a tragic event (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1993).

Adversities may be chronic (poverty, racism) or acute (sudden loss of a loved one, victim of an armed robbery). They may affect systems within the individual (a virus that attacks the immune system) or multiple levels and settings simultaneously (a natural disaster that affects individual systems of stress, beliefs, and behaviours, as well as broader systems of family, school, health care, agriculture). According to Goldstein and Brooks (2013) adversities are also disturbances to the function or viability of a system; experiences that threaten adaptation or development Poverty; homelessness; child maltreatment; political conflict; disaster.

Adversity and emerging adult students

Transition to university is a difficult stage which many young adults face. Transitions are a source of stress where emerging adults leave their family networks behind as they enter into unfamiliar territories (Latham & Green, 1997). Academic pressures university students face often lead to increased mental illness as opposed to that of the general population (Macaskill, 2013). Added to academic pressures, university students experience novel stressors such as financial burdens, new living arrangements, new social networks, new family and social roles (Tavolacci, 2011, Pidjeon and Pickett, 2017).

Similarly, university students have been identified as being at a potentially elevated risk of distress and mental ill health, due to the increased demands of the academic environment combined with personal factors, along with the need for adjustment to the challenges of tertiary study (Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm, 2012).University populations are estimated to be equally, if not more, at risk of mental ill health than their age-matched peers in the general population, and there is an association between mental health problems in university students and reduced educational outcomes (Stallman, 2010).

College is a complex interaction of interpersonal exchanges, academic expectations, intrapersonal development, and numerous external and internal demands. The unique environment that college provides can be both an opportunity for tremendous growth but also for stress and academic hardship. These entail academic pressure and competition, limited academic support, requirements to make a new social network, finances, and peer pressure toward alcohol and drug use (Hartley, 2011).

Lo-oh & Afumbom (2017) reported that transition rates from home to university have witnessed peaks; causing overcrowded university neighbourhoods thus enabling young adults to gain freedom and independence as they now live individually in hostels and on their own. And this may be worsened by the presence of negative peers. Excessive drinking and smoking both in public and inside hostels, luxurious and indecent dressing, dating experiences and gambling are some common risky behaviours reported among young adults in Cameroon's universities. This seems to be en vogue consequently leading to escalated immorality among today's transitioning youth in universities in particular (Lo-oh & Afumbom, 2017).

Attending university therefore is widely acknowledged to be a stressful psychosocial event, as students navigate the process of adapting to new social and educational environments as well as demands. Some of the aforementioned transitional adversities can result in students withdrawing from their studies with a considerable number of them failing to return to university to obtain higher education (Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011). The status quo is seemingly worsened by the fact that emerging adulthood as a human developmental stage is plagued with developmental changes and challenges described by Arnett (2000) as uncertainty about the future, instability, identity issues and personal responsibility needs.

Adversity and Emerging adulthood in the less developed world (Africa)

One of the greatest challenges facing governments and policymakers in Africa today is how to provide opportunities for the continent's more than 200 million youth so that they can have decent lives and contribute to the economic development of their countries. Undoubtedly, the challenges for youth that are central to Africa's economic development are numerous and varied they include employment, health and political participation. Conversely, the size, energy, enthusiasm, innovation and dynamism of youth are assets that can be harnessed for Africa's development with appropriate policies that deal adequately with the issues facing them (Kwabena and Mwangi, 2013).

Abbink (2005) asserted that to be young in contemporary Africa has come to mean being disadvantaged, vulnerable, and marginal, both economically and politically. African young adults are in a period of waithood, a portmanteau term of "wait" and "hood," a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood. It represents a prolonged adolescence or an involuntary delay in reaching adulthood, in which young people are unable to find employment, get married, and establish their own families. According to Honwana (2012) young Africans constitute a disenfranchised majority, largely excluded from major socioeconomic institutions and political processes. Many youths cannot afford to form families and households and are unable to become fully independent and partake in the privileges and responsibilities of social adulthood.

Youth are especially vulnerable to the structural conditions that generate poverty and limit socioeconomic mobility. Declining opportunities in rural areas lead young men and women to migrate to the cities, where their chances of finding employment and stable livelihoods remain very slim. Although growing numbers of young people are completing secondary school and even attending university, the mismatch between educational systems and the labour markets leaves many unemployed or underemployed; they are pushed into the oversaturated informal economy or become informal workers in the formal sector (Chen, 2006).

Nsamenang (2007) cited in Lo-oh (2014) posited that African youth are often tagged as problematic without any viable information on how the tomorrow of these future leaders will look like. As such they are considered insignificant in relation to the progress of their nations, reason why they are not listened to nor allowed to contribute. Worst still their plight expressed through revendications is often misinterpreted as constituting political agendas especially those cooked by the opposition parties (Lo-oh, 2014).

Currently in some parts of Cameroon (English speaking and Northern regions) some youths as observed may have been grossly baptized into violent conflicts and political gimmicks. This inevitably urges this paper to capture them as victims in dire need of oxygen as a buffer of survival against the complex socio-political issues surrounding their entanglement in wars and other forms of violence as young soldiers, political tools, protection racketeers, and criminal gangs. Added to these, their situation is precarious since their vision for adulthood is blackened by difficult economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological and health conditions that have left most of them feeling hopeless in regard to the future of their adulthood (Lo-oh, 2012).

The foregoing assertions have acted as a whistleblower with clear signals to this paper that in order to grasp the palavers of youth and specifically university going emerging adults today, it is fundamental to x-ray their transitional experiences as they struggle to become independent, responsible and fruitful adults with a view of probably focusing the moon on their seemingly dark and taunting state so as to project those who display bullet proofs to their floundering peers and establish their own space in global developmental literature.

Perspectives for positive development
Positive development is conceptualized as comprising the dimensions of civic action and engagement, trust and tolerance of others, trust in authorities and organizations, social competence, and life satisfaction. A growing body of research suggests that positive development in emerging adulthood is an important asset for young people, with distinct developmental antecedents and consequences for later functioning, (Arnett, Zukauskiene, & Sugimura, 2014).

According to Lo-oh (2017) positive youth development is development that is positive and productive for both youth and their communities. It accrues from an intentional process that promotes positive outcomes for young people through the provision of opportunities, choices, relationships and the support necessary for youth to fully participate and become productive individuals. Lo-oh (2013)

argued that schooling and education is vital for transition to adulthood in Cameroon. In Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Cameroon, parents, students, teachers and education officials see schooling as that agency which prepares young people for formal-sector work, better economic activity and financial autonomy; and that schooling intervenes in young people's transition to work, usually inhibiting economic activity (Ansell, 2004; Ndille, 2009); and they generally perceive that more positive schooling attitudes led to school success and achievement in later life (Ansell, 2004).

But the foregoing adversities already examined in this paper dampens hopes of a flourishing tomorrow for emerging adult students in universities in Cameroon thus increasing fears that the leaders of tomorrow will not transition positively into adulthood so as to ensure continuity in individual, family, community and national development. Therefore it is imperative that parents, civil society organizations, the church and government should work collaboratively to accompany university students so as to uphold a better vision for a better tomorrow in Cameroon.

Concluding reflections on the status quo
This paper is crafted in the midst of deafening gun battles between revolutionary youth in Anglophone regions of Cameroon which host two state universities and other private tertiary institutions as well as Boko Haram insurgencies in the Northern parts of the country with two major universities. The socio-political malaise has unfortunately sent a greater chunk of young people into dishonourable graves, living a majority of them hopeless and helpless with fears of what their adulthood will look like.

The latter is motivated by cross border attacks from youths who may have been abandoned politically, economically, culturally and socially by the government while the former involves young people who have unsuccessfully attempted to reverse their socio-economic and political woes through existing channels thus they felt they need to forcefully elevate their plight. Kwabena and Mwangi (2013) lamented that despite the elevated awareness of the challenges confronting Africa's youth, several African countries still do not seem to have developed comprehensive and effective policies to deal with the issues facing this large and growing segment of the African population or to have in place a means to assess the progress made.

Unfortunately these are the leaders of the future who have been thrown away and neglected to sort out their worries like street dogs in uncoordinated battle fields that have resulted in floods of blood and chunks of bones and flesh. Many of these youths are emerging adults in university students and are victims of such monstrous events; they are kidnapped from hostels and lecture halls, raped, tortured and executed in horrible circumstances without any judicial proceedings to defend and uphold their cases.

Such mind blowing scenarios have been deprived of abnormality and have embraced normality in the day to day lives of university youth in some areas in Cameroon. The complete absence of dialogue and peaceful platforms to eradicate the war that has engulfed tertiary education students is evidence of government's careless, carefree and unconcerned attitude towards youth emancipation and empowerment. This is in tandem with Slavin, Hatchett,

Shibnall, Schindler, & Fendell (2011) who suggested that students are not flourishing but feeling burnt out, overloaded and depressed.

All of these palavers added to identity and personality issues as well as transitional adversities attached to emerging adulthood and through the university with its own woes as already examined may bring much pressure to bear on the young adults. This lives them with unanswered questions which may look like; who am I, where do I come from, where am I going to, will I arrive, will I make it, will I get married, have my own home and can I really contribute to the wellbeing of my society? The answers they give to these questions are embedded in their thoughts, how they plan their daily lives and how they carry themselves in the midst of the status quo.

But as observed some may be deaf, dumb and blind to the adversities seen in literature as those observed within the context of universities in Cameroon, mounting hope and portraying optimism through giant steps and digging through the tough walls to escape the harsh super imposed barricades on their way to a blossomed tomorrow. But the efforts of such university going trailblazers are absent in the literature with just a paucity of findings to decry their plight and emit rays of light on their gainful journeys. This review therefore applauds third decade university students who have resolutely denied the appellation that tags them as hopeless, forgotten disadvantaged and futureless citizens of the continent and Cameroon in particular so as to create their space in the global and national developmental literature.

Future research that may uncover and share their memoires to less hopeful peers who may be floundering in the process of transition will be a great booster, a notion that marries Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) who posited that a fundamental assertion of positive psychology is that understanding and helping to support the lives of healthy people is as important as helping to heal the wounds of those in distress. To wrap up, Nsamenang (2012) raised concerns about the need for more research to understand how African youth growing up in troubling circumstances successfully produce competent self-identities.

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