

AN INTERNATIONAL LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH PROJECT INVESTIGATING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG ADULTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: MANAGING ATTRITION

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Abstract

There is a dearth of research around the personality and lifespan development, mental health functioning and cultural influences of emerging adults in an African context. Psychological knowledge is disproportionately based on data from Western industrialised countries. As many facets of Psychology have been found to differ across cultural contexts, this bias restricts the generalizability of research findings. By examining a range of psychological factors among emerging adults aged 18-25 years old in African contexts, this longitudinal research project (placed within a larger intercontinental study) seeks to address these crucial concerns over a 5-year period to improve the representativeness of African-based Psychology research. The South African leg of the international study (Western, Northern and Central South Africa) sought to duplicate parallel investigations being conducted in Kenya, Ghana and Namibia. The study's conceptual framework was based on the Social Investment theory and the Emerging Adulthood hypothesis. For the South African leg of the study, a sample of 800 South Africans between the ages of 18 and 19 was purposefully selected. Wave 1 and wave 2 have been completed with a team of research assistants (RA's) who were critical in minimising attrition. Two focus groups were held with the RA's to reflect on the technical approach to data collection. These were transcribed and analysed. The RA's reported that they experienced a range of challenges and had to engage in creative and innovative ways to limit attrition between the waves. The RA's reported that the incentive was not sufficient for certain cohorts in view of the amount of time that was required to complete the surveys. RA's also reported that they needed to provide additional incentives, drive to the homes of the participants and continuously affirm the participants regarding the importance of this research in the African context. Ethics clearance was obtained from the ethics boards at the relevant institutions. It is hoped that this study would advance local psychological research and knowledge in South Africa addressing personality development in emerging adults however we need to engage in reflective practices with research assistants in order to minimise attrition, so that the African experience in personality development can be reported.

Keywords: Personality development, South Africa, cultural values, mental health, African-based Psychology, emerging adults, longitudinal research, attrition.

1 INTRODUCTION

Psychology is the study of human beings, but psychological knowledge relies disproportionately on evidence from the United States and other Western, industrialised nations, who together make up only approximately 11% of the world's population [1,13]. This long-term, large-scale, longitudinal research project aims to address this important concern and increase the representativeness in psychology by exploring a variety of psychological variables among emerging adults in Africa. Long-term projects provide rich information about how personality traits that are visible early in life unfold to predict health, longevity, and career and family outcomes [4,6,11]. Even short-term designs allow for tests of dynamic processes and causation. For example, a review of ninety-two longitudinal studies from Western contexts showed average increases in conscientiousness, emotional stability, and social dominance (extraversion) from ages 20 to 40, then an increase in agreeableness and a decrease in social vitality (extraversion) and openness after 40 [10]. They also allow for an assessment of how life experiences precede personality change, e.g., as in Social Investment Theory, where commitment to new social roles has been seen to predict positive personality change [8], and which has been seen to occur at younger ages in cultural contexts with an earlier onset of transition to the labour force [2]. Additionally, personal values have been seen to predict personality change in the West [12]. Finally, ongoing studies also allow for psychometric explorations that depend on the administration of many variables to the same sample [5]. Neither long running nor shorter-term longitudinal studies including psychological

variables are common in non-Western countries, and they are virtually non-existent in Africa. The South African component of the project aims to replicate parallel studies currently conducted in Kenya, Namibia, and Ghana. As Africa has the fastest growing youth population in the world [9]. The culture in non-Western countries is different to that in western countries. The majority of African youth lack solid employment opportunities [9]. Only one in six of the 420 million young people in the region between the ages of 15 and 35 who are employed, while one-third of them are unemployed [9]. Adolescence in Africa follows a unique developmental phase into adulthood. Therefore, this longitudinal study is a gold standard method within psychology that will allow one to unpack this uniqueness.

1.1 Problem statement

The overarching aims of this research project with a large and relatively representative sample of South African young adults are: (a) to better inform social scientists, counsellors, policy makers and educators within South Africa about the characteristics and needs of this generation; and (b) to allow for comparative work with established knowledge from other cultural contexts, in order to increase representation of Africans in psychology and to disentangle universal from culturally specific aspects of these psychological phenomena. A study of this nature on youth development in all these contexts will shine a spotlight on efforts to improve youth development across Africa. This in turn will go a long way to improving the well-being of the next generation of adults in these contexts. This study has the potential to contribute local psychological research and information from South Africa regarding personality development in emerging adults, thus adding a South African voice to inter-continental psychology research and psychology scholarship. Research on mental health in South Africa can benefit local mental health practitioners (social workers, psychologists, psychological counsellors) and can inform the need for tailored services for young adults in South Africa.

The longitudinal nature of this study will allow for an exploration of the interaction between mental health and other life experiences and individual differences, to better understand the lived experience of emerging adult South Africans with regard to psychological disorder symptoms. In the long term, more psychological research in South Africa will mean that education on psychology in South Africa will include more locally adapted information, and the textbooks will not be predominantly based on research from Europe and the United States. This study will also present an opportunity for local community voices and opinions to be heard, and for their experiences and points of view to be represented in psychological research.

With longitudinal studies though, there is always the challenge of attrition, and this aspect was specifically addressed in this paper to achieve the aim and objectives of the parent project.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of this research project is to examine and explore individual variation in various psychological phenomena (including Life Experiences, Personality Traits, Mental Health and related Disorders, as well as Values, World Views, and Cognitive styles) within the emerging adult population in the South African context over a period of five years i.e. two waves of data collection per year with data collected via online and face to face means. Given this longitudinal nature of this research, an underlying objective is to manage the attrition so that there is optimal representation over the next few years therefore following the first year of data collection, an objective central to the successful management of the overall research is to manage attrition and therefore exploring creative ways in managing attrition within the context of the longitudinal study of this nature is an overarching objective of this study. This paper will specifically explore the issues that affected attrition from wave 1 to wave 2 of the data collection from the perspective of the data collectors

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research design

The study utilized two focus groups with research assistants involved in the data collection during wave 1 and wave 2 of this longitudinal research project. The qualitative data obtained from the focus groups facilitated an in depth understanding of perceptions of the research assistants of their data collection experiences during the first and second wave of the longitudinal study.

2.2 Sampling and Participants

This study used psychology undergraduate and postgraduate students who volunteered and were remunerated as research assistants in the Wave 1 and Wave 2 of data collection. One focus group occurred with six undergraduate students, and another was held with nine postgraduate students. All the participants were involved in waves 1 and 2 of the data collection for this study. Some were merely contacting participants to respond to the online survey while others were collecting data in person.

2.3 Data collection and Procedures

This research was guided by a focus group guide consisting of a series of questions pertaining to their experience of data collection and the measures that they implemented to follow up with the participants from Wave 1. The questions focused on how the RA's experienced the data collection, community engagement, the training sessions that prepared them for their role as a RA, and what they learnt from the experience as a whole.

2.4 Data analysis

The focus groups were transcribed verbatim and incorporated into the Atlas Ti. data management software which facilitated a thematic analysis (TA) that allowed the researchers to develop a collective meaning and understanding of the research assistants' experiences as it related to minimizing attrition between the two waves of data collection. Several phases of coding occurred where the research team collectively identified themes that could potentially assist in minimizing attrition in longitudinal studies of this nature.

3 RESULTS

The research assistants provided important feedback that would be used in future waves of the larger longitudinal project and can inform other longitudinal studies with adolescents. In summary these included the challenges experienced around the length of the survey, the language of the survey instrument, and the necessity of clarifying terms before data collection commenced, as well as the importance of facilitating partnerships with municipal structures in the communities where the surveys were conducted. For example, if the community library would be able to facilitate access to the participants in the event that the emerging adults did not have access to a mobile device or data, then facilitating a partnership with the municipal structure in charge of that facility could assist. While these were general findings, the following key themes were developed from the TA and will be discussed in more depth.

3.1 Theme 1: The value of offering incentives to participants

An incentive was provided to each participant upon the completion of each wave of data collection. The research assistants appeared to be conflicted about the value of the incentives and while some felt that it was a necessary component to indicate value of the participants' contribution, others felt that a monetary incentive (a shopping voucher) was not necessarily the best way to maintain participants' interest in the research. There were logistical constraints experienced in redeeming the voucher, some participants used the incentive to purchase alcohol even though it was stipulated that the voucher could not be used for the purchase of alcohol, while some felt that the amount of the incentive was insufficient considering the amount of time that each participant needed to spend in completing the survey instrument. These were expressed in the following quotations:

Most participants did it because of the incentive, obviously, because now, like for the second data collection, they don't want to complete the surveys. So yeah. And most of them were complaining that it was way too long. (PG P3)

For me, the most challenging thing was obviously what they said, but also with the voucher they were complaining about it not working and so on and so on. So that was tricky. (UG P5)

I think incentives work differently overseas, because they don't have what we have for the lack of knowledge that we don't have. So, these kids are going to buy alcohol instead of food. (PG P1)

3.2 Theme 2: Affirming participants for contributing to African knowledge

The research assistants also reported that it is important for participants in the longitudinal study to be affirmed for their contribution to psychology, however this should be prefaced acknowledging the status of the research project and the advantage that participating in this study has not only for the individual, but towards understanding emerging adulthood in an African context. This was reflected in the following quotations:

Would it be possible to have like, almost like a talk, like at the community centre, and like, maybe to some statistics about how underrepresented African, like the African perspective is in psychology and the impact that has, like not like to sciency just like very much like, you know, that anyone can understand and maybe that can try and like build up some incentive without. (PG P2)

Like at the end of the day, like you are important, you are valued, like kind of going through that process. But I think a lot of those communities are looking for some kind of hope, looking for something to hold on to. And if we can provide that then cool, like, let's do that. (PG P6)

And they were interested, oh, I told them this was internationally collaborative study, they were also very motivated. (UG P2)

3.3 Theme 3: Create a social media platform of support for participants – facilitate networking between participants

It was reported that due to the length of the survey, there may be a need to engage participants via various social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook or TikTok to maintain interest. These platforms could form a way of constantly informing the participants of the progress of the project, when the subsequent waves would be conducted and could provide a space for participants to network with each other. One of the participants suggested that a short TikTok video should precede the commencement of the next wave and then a link to the online survey could be provided in this space. The research assistants felt that constant engagement and communication would manage the attrition across future waves. This was evident in the following quotations:

Because I kind of send them random messages just to remind them every now and then that this is an ongoing thing...I think with an engagement thing (UG P2)

What if we filmed (laughs)...Someone filmed a very short clip, and a link was sent to them about that. And then after that, they got the link to the survey to another wave (PG P1)

Within the context of this study, issues of confidentiality as well as access need to be considered.

3.4 Theme 4: Reluctance to continue to participate

This theme was developed as there were a range of reasons why participants disengaged from Wave 2 data collection according to the research assistants. The reasons were related to psychology as a discipline, and how the questions in the survey required the participants to engage in a process of reflection and the research assistants indicated that it required the participants to be vulnerable due to the 'work' required to respond to the items. This was reflected in the following quotations:

I think the difficult thing about it is that the nature of the questions makes them feel vulnerable (UG P3).

And when they saw what the questions were asking, specifically, they didn't want to appear naked, emotionally naked in front of people that they don't know. And because it's such a big project, they didn't want to appear naked on the international stage (UG P2).

3.5 Theme 5: The language usage in the questionnaires

The questionnaires used in this study were developed in English and the community in which the research assistants collected data were predominantly Afrikaans. Although the research assistants received training on how to translate and better explain complex English words in Afrikaans, some participants found it challenging when completing the questionnaires as they were not English first language speakers. This is evident in the quotations below:

Many of my participants weren't English home language. And the wording was kind of complicated for them. And that was what was missing from them (UG P2)

I feel like I don't know, they could have maybe been a translated version of the questionnaire maybe. Because sometimes the participant would ask me, what does this mean in Afrikaans (PG P1)

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study highlighted important considerations for conducting longitudinal research with emerging adults. These findings could prove helpful when conducting these types of studies with this age group. With regard to the survey itself, the participants needed to have been warned about the length of the survey and the personal nature of the questions before obtaining their consent in wave 1. Using social media to promote the study could potentially prepare participants for the personal nature of the questions and ensure that research participants buy into the study for the reasons of advancing the science around emerging adulthood within an African context. This idea around using social media within the context of a research study, the ethics of confidentiality and anonymity need to be considered.

The decision made on the larger project was for the instrument to be administered in English in all the African countries given that the countries involved in the study represent so many different languages. For this reason, the language usage in the questionnaires should have been addressed through a piloting of the survey with small groups of emerging adults from the communities of interest.

One of the sites for the study was included specifically to ensure that the sample in the Western Cape included participants from a low-income community. At this site, a partnership was formed to ensure that the community (and its emerging adult population) would benefit from their involvement in the study. The data collection was done via a sports event that was organised for the relevant age group to introduce them to the study and invite them to participate. This allowed for the opportunity to diversify the sample in an engaged manner. Through working with community leaders in this manner the first wave successfully represented an inclusive sample from a diversified demographic.

During the second wave, it proved difficult to get the same participants involved in the follow-up just 6 months later. Much of the difficulties could have been due to the timing of the second event (too late in the year and under extreme weather conditions) and the change of venue to outdoors which was done just the day before the event. It was necessary to proceed with the event given the arrangements that had been made. Additionally, it became clear to the research team that the community leaders did not necessarily grasp the gravity of the design requirements when conducting a longitudinal study of this nature.

The issue of incentivizing data collection is a contentious issue, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. This study did include vulnerable samples in that they were young adults some of whom yielded from low-income contexts with high rates of unemployment and poverty. The unemployment rate amongst young adults in South Africa was just under 60% in 2022 [3]. This figure includes 15–24-year-olds who are available for and seeking employment [3].

Incentives (R40 shopping voucher) were viewed differently by different participants (and RAs) depending on their background. It was also the adolescents from the under-resourced communities who found a way to use the vouchers to buy alcohol instead of food thus further impacting on the ethics involved in these dynamics. In a study of this nature, it is pertinent to build in processes for ensuring that the participants are incentivised by the contribution that they will be making to science, in this case, to the understanding of this developmental stage from the African perspective. Incentives should be nominal and just enough to cover the costs involved in being available for data collection to rule out coercion. Krugar et al. (2014) argue that an effective way to offset individual incentives is to offer incentives to the community that would benefit the participants indirectly. In the current study this was done through the donation of sports equipment and the hosting of the sports event for the 18–19-year-olds during both waves of data collection.

It might be necessary to call into question the responses given by participants who were not participating in the study for the 'right reasons. If their interest was only in the incentives and not the contribution that they would make to this area of research, then it is not clear whether they would have been committed enough to answer the question honestly or whether they gave the questions the right amount of consideration. This we will never know, but it brings to light how important it is to strike the right balance when it comes to incentivising research conducted with this cohort.

There are numerous advantages to building partnerships in the communities where data collection is being conducted. Based on our experience with this longitudinal study so far, these partnerships are crucial to ensuring the buy-in of the adolescents as they need the support to be able to complete the survey. Community members/leaders could also help to get them involved in and maintain their interest in the study. To ensure this, the community leaders must be more integrally involved in setting up the study and understanding and impacting on the scientific and ethical implications of all the decisions made towards the collection of data.

Finally, this study recommends that longitudinal studies with vulnerable populations build the above-mentioned considerations into the design of the study. These should include piloting of the instrument in the various contexts, thoroughly informing the participants of the nature of the data collection as part of the consent process, appropriate incentivising of participants with an emphasis on their commitment to the contribution their inputs would make to the study and partnering with the community representatives while setting up the study to inform the design of the study as well as support the involvement of the participants in the study.

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