

# Hope and Positive Development in the Third Decade of Life. A Theoretical Perspective on Tertiary Education Students in Cameroon

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**Abstract:-**University is relatively considered a stressful moment in the life of students due to numerous academic workloads and academic activities. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that some university students are in emerging adulthood, a developmental period which is psychologically fraught with uncertainty, instability and identity issues among others. Added to these, the context of most universities like Cameroon which is marred with political, economic and social turbulence common to other developing societies in the sub Saharan region makes life unbearable. Looking at the challenges that confront tertiary education students in the third decade of life, increases possibilities of fears that they will founder thus narrowing the route to a blossomed transition into adulthood and through the university from home into the world of work. However, observations reveal that some have remained hopeful as they continuously believe in themselves and their worth. As such, they have resiliently shrugged off the vast burden placed on them by the adult society as they struggle intentionally with continuous efforts to succeed. Being hopeful and self-efficacy beliefs are observed to be some of the effective drivers that pull emerging adults through the storms of university transition thus facilitating positive development into subsequent life stages. Unfortunately just a paucity of literature albeit theoretically actually narrates via scholarly corridors the monumental successes recorded by students as they sail flourishingly through university in the midst of storms an in the third decade of life. This paper examines and addresses the foregoing through the lenses of some theories.

**Keywords:** Emerging adulthood, resilience, self-efficacy, hope, positive development

## I. INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from home to university and into the world of work is generally considered to be problematic due to multiple challenges emerging adult students have to grapple with such as sudden independence from home and parental control, peer pressure and influence in the university neighbourhood as well as anxiety about getting a job after graduation. The situation is aggravated because this period of human developmental is plagued with developmental changes and challenges described by Arnett (2000) as uncertainty about the future, instability, identity issues and personal responsibility needs. For some African, like Cameroonian emerging adults, Lo-oh (2012) raised economic, social,

political, psychological, and cultural and health issues which have barricaded their hope for a fruitful future as adults.

However it seems that many students in the third decade of their lives often navigate resiliently through the adversities that confront them thus developing positively and transitioning flourishingly into adulthood. For some students adjusting during the transition to college, the ability to maintain a positive perspective on one's future helps promote resilience in difficult moments, providing a buffer against the negative impacts of stress and maintaining motivation to achieve one's goals, (Leary & DeRosier, 2012). Lo-oh (2017) reported that adversities have not stopped youths from succeeding as they remain positive, forward looking and productive.

To establish a comprehensive theoretical base on how third decade university students swim through pools of adversities as they manage the turbulence of transition from home to school, school to work and into adulthood in the midst of hardship cum identity issues, this paper examines the theoretical underpinnings that explain emerging adults self-efficacy and hope with perspectives for positive development, at a time when calls have multiplied for scholarly examinations that ascertain how young people growing in troubling circumstances successfully navigate themselves into a bright future.

## II. THE SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS THEORY BY ALBERT BANDURA (1977)

Bandura's self-efficacy theory provides a foundation for this paper to clarify students' perceptions of their self-worth, competence, autonomy, abilities to master and achieve, and perseverance in the face of significant social, psychological, and academic challenges. This theory facilitates understanding of how young adults' current situations, previous experiences, cultural antecedents, and belief systems affect their ways of thinking and acting, personal goal settings, and educational values (Bandura, 1977; Mischel & Shoda, 1999; Zimmerman, 1989).

Bandura (1977) employed the term self-efficacy to denote an individual's belief about whether they can successfully engage in and execute a specific behavior. Decisions about self-

efficacy determine how much effort individuals will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and adverse experiences. A strong sense of self efficacy enables an individual to feel empowered to influence and even create the circumstances of his or her life. Individuals' perceived self-efficacy in managing a specific situation also reinforces their sense of self-worth and self-confidence that they can control the situation.

It is important to understand how emerging adults in universities perceive they are worthy or unworthy as they engage in the undertaking and endeavour to promote their achievements boost self-confidence and sail to productive adulthood through higher education. For example, individuals who lack confidence in school have been identified as unmotivated and disengaged, and are said to find non-academic activities more satisfying. Conversely, students with high self-efficacy are more likely to be motivated and resilient and to persevere in school to achieve success. They are often confident in themselves, their abilities and skills as learners. They are described as resilient, self-confident, and able to persevere, and are known to acknowledge the challenges that confront them but remain resolute to succeed. (Bandura, 1977; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, Whiting, 2009c).

The focus of this paper is on the motivators for success and the personal and circumstantial factors that contribute to emerging adults efforts in their transition from adolescence through emerging adulthood to full and productive adulthood and across the university from high school to the work place. According to Bandura, individuals with high self-efficacy have strong personal characteristics; they are motivated and optimistic, believe they are competent, and are more willing to seek out academic challenges (Bandura, 1977; Whiting, 2009c). Therefore, successful university students may be self-efficacy learners who are motivated to succeed, have expectations for their academic outcomes, and perceive value in going to school and in their own abilities to overcome barriers especially when supported by those in their environment.

Eccles and Wigfield (2002) equally found that self-efficacy is made more feasible and visible as self-regulated learners believe they can perform effectively, are more self-aware, set numerous and varied goals for themselves, evaluate how their performance compares to a standard or to the performance of others, and react proactively to performance outcomes (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). Students can be described as self-regulated to the degree to which they are self-aware of their learning or thinking processes and motivations, as well as by their active participation in the learning process and in achieving their goals (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Zimmerman, 1989).

Bandura (1977) argued that although there are various actions individuals can take to achieve success; people often avoid doing these things because they do not have the right incentives or they lack appropriate skills. Nevertheless,

efficacy expectations are essential to individuals' choice of activity, how much effort they will expend on the activity, and the level of perseverance they achieve under demanding conditions. Understanding successful students' expectancy beliefs is relevant to the present review because it helps explicate whether these students equate having a good education with productive futures (outcome expectation), and clarifies the extent to which they believe in their abilities to participate in rigorous academic programs and other social activities to raise funds even in the midst of economic hurdles (efficacy expectation).

Those who cease their coping efforts prematurely tend to retain self-debilitating expectations and fears, which sometimes account for the high rate of school dropouts among students particularly males (Hayenga & Corpus, 2010). For example, students may question whether they have the skills and motivation necessary to achieve academic success, or whether education is worth the effort. For some they entertain doubts about their abilities to succeed in school and may be afraid of failure; consequently, they may be less motivated to engage in learning (Haimovitz, Wormington, & Corpus, 2011; Opendakker & Maulana, 2011).

However, the essence of self-efficacy theory in this review is to find tune what motivates some students to persevere academically, economically and psychologically and what personal and circumstantial factors support these students' efforts to succeed in their studies. Observations in Cameroon point to numerous remarks from the media and the broader society where the adult populace casts doubts and tag third decade students as half baked, morally depraved and deprived elements who are poorly equipped to adopt working positions talk less of transforming the various sectors where they may be employed to work subsequently as well as the society at large.

Added to these, there are numerous fallacies from various facets of the Cameroonian adult society and even from the western hemisphere that blindly tag universities in the country as ill equipped and improperly impregnated to give birth to fine products who may transform the society and take it to another level. Morse so, a vast majority of youth seek scholarships to the perceived prosperous West to the extent that some sail through the violent waters of the Mediterranean corridors to acquire a better education across the oceans. All these concerns are known to the university emerging adults in Cameroon and may act as negative motivators, sometimes inevitably pushing them to question the authenticity and validity of their present environment as the right gardens in which seeds like them may be groomed to a blossomed harvest tomorrow.

Added to these most of them are migrants from rural settings to urban areas; with new neighbourhood settings and living arrangements, living in poverty, attending inadequately equipped and poorly staffed university centres, living in risky neighbourhoods exposed to crime, prostitution, beer parlours

and violence, and experiencing the developmental changes of adolescence to emerging adulthood, from home to school and from high school to university, coupled with new and sometimes deviant peers. These may undermine the self-efficacy and motivation needed to flourish in their transition.

Albeit these challenges observations point to scores of university going emerging adults who remain hopeful, positive minded, optimistic, forward looking, confident and trustworthy of themselves and their capabilities as well as potentials. Thus they consistently, constructively, directly and intentionally put in their best and work towards attaining their goals so as to emerge victorious in the midst of daily storms that may stand on their way in the transition to full and productive adulthood and through the university system. It may be possible therefore that those who exhibit greater intrinsic motivational attributes tend to persevere more toward academic, social, economic and psychological progress. Unfortunately, just a paucity of literature exists on the positive strides showcased by emerging adults in universities in Cameroon.

### III. THEORY OF HOPE SNYDER (2000, 2002)

Hope can be viewed either as an emotional state, or as a cognitive and motivational state prompting the hoping person to reach a particular goal (Snyder, 2000a; Snyder, Harris, Irving, & Anderson, 1991). Lopez (2013) believes that the way in which people think about the future, that is how they hope, determines their success in relationships, career and business. Snyder, the author of the cognitive theory of hope, defined hope as the sum of perceived capacities to produce routes to desired goals, along with the perceived motivation to use those routes (Snyder, 2000a).

In other words, hope is seen as a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of agency (goal oriented energy) and pathways (planning to meet the goals), (Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1999) as cited by Snyder (2000a). Snyder's cognitive hope theory perceives hope as involving four components: Agency, Pathways, Goal, and Barriers. Agency refers to the motivation and energy one possesses to be able to undertake the routes towards one's goals.

Lopez (2013) assumes that, over time, people develop and build capacity for persistence and long-time efforts that makes them the authors of their lives. A pathway refers to the routes people take to achieve their desired goals, and the individual's perceived ability to produce these routes (Snyder, 2000a). The pathways component of hope requires the anticipation of varying means and paths, the ability to assess their effectiveness, and the understanding of causal relations. Many people are capable of generating multiple pathways (multiple pathway thinking) from which they then select the most suitable or simple one.

Both agency and pathways are essential for goal attainment (Snyder et al., 1991). Goals are abstract mental targets that

guide human behaviours (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). The targets play a highly important role in hopeful thinking because they provide a direction and an endpoint (Snyder, 2000a). Their effect is both motivational and invigorating and it reflects the strength of an individual's resolution to achieve the desired outcome. Thus, targets are an indispensable part of the process. An essential characteristic of the target is its subjective value (Snyder, 2002).

Moreover, in order to exhibit a positive impact on the hoping person's motivation, the goal needs to be attainable. The probability of achieving the goal lies between zero (goal cannot be achieved) and 100 % (goal is attainable under any circumstances). The greatest motivational force is associated with medium-probability goals (Cheavens, Feldman, Woodward, & Snyder, 2006). Snyder (2002) distinguishes two basic types of goals:

#### A. Positive or "approach" goals:

- a goal that is desired for the first time;
- a goal which serves to maintain an already achieved goal;
- a goal aimed at continuous progress when some advances have already been made.

#### B. Negative goals:

- to stop or deter something before it happens;
- to delay or deter the occurrence of something happening.

The combination of the three components - agency, pathways and goals - forms the motivational concept of hope. These three core elements are accompanied by a fourth one: barriers. Barriers impede the attainment of desired goals. If a barrier occurs, the hoping person will either give up or use pathway thoughts to create new routes (Snyder, 2000a). Barriers disturb the simplicity of goal attainment and force people to conjure up more effective pathways; yet, they need to be viewed as natural parts of life that can occur at any moment.

Many students enter their first year of university filled with hope, but this hope is based on a perception that anyone can reach any desired goal, without any focused ideas on how this is achieved (Snyder, 2002). This kind of hope may be better described as optimism. It is based on emotion and, as such, is susceptible to fading or disappearing entirely when students face challenges (Williams & Butler, 2010). Some students will possess, or can develop, a different kind of hope one based on thinking about one's goals and the motivations to pursue them, and the possible pathways to those goals. This present study therefore examines positive development not just in terms of optimism but also as portrayed through hopeful thinking matched with intentional and constructive goals and planned efforts to achieve the goals.

Snyder (1995) further defined hope as individuals' perceptions regarding their capacities to (1) clearly conceptualize goals, (2) develop the specific strategies to reach those goals

(pathways thinking), and (3) initiate and sustain the motivation for using those strategies (agency thinking). Hope is having clear goals along with the perceived capability to discover pathways to those goals and a belief that one can initiate action to follow those pathways, a combination of “pathways thinking” and “agency thinking” (Snyder, 2000).

Locke and Latham (2002) have described goal setting as helping students direct their attention and effort towards productive activities; energizing and stimulating action; encouraging the perseverance that Duckworth and colleagues call “grit” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly (2007) defines agency as the condition of the self as agent, the self’s actions or behaviours as the means, and an effected change in the social or physical environment as the outcome, that is, agency is where an individual can bring about change through their own actions.

Choice is essential to agency because choosing is an action through which agents may simultaneously express unique preferences and alter the world according to those preferences (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). Pathway thinking describes a person’s ability to generate one or more workable routes to their goal. These mental plans or road maps that guide hopeful thought have been described as “way power” (Snyder, 1995). People who have willpower or the ambition to achieve their goals may not necessarily have a similarly developed ability to create the paths that lead them to attainment of goals.

Hope theory (Smith, 2006) is a strengths based concept within the field of positive psychology where the concept of ‘learned optimism has shifted the focus to helping clients construct positive perceptions about the future through goal setting, optimism and hope (Seligman, 1991; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). School psychologists in particular have recognized the benefits of practices that are based on strength building, rather than deficiency focused (Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg and Furlong, 2004).

According to Rutter (1993) coping strategies based on hopeful thinking are important for resilience to psycho-social adversity. The importance of retaining hope in adverse circumstances is vital to university going emerging adults in Cameroon who are victims of social, political, economic, cultural, psychological walls that may deprived them from achieving their full potentials. Asangha (2015) seemingly confirmed this by adding that a majority of African youth are not overly defeated by their difficult circumstances but instead navigate their challenges successfully into productive pathways.

The essence of hope theory in paper of this nature is that it explains how young adults faced with varied challenges in the university milieu persist and persevere and it also reiterates why and how emerging adults in universities in Cameroon may set goals and work tirelessly as well as stay committed in a bid to achieve them as a step to transition to desired and fruitful future roles as full adults. This may involve pursuing

multiple channels individually, with peers, with support from the faculty, family and the community as a whole.

Lo-oh’s (2017) argued that young people in Africa have remained extraordinarily positive, forward looking and focused on a more productive life in future. Lo-oh (2014b) earlier found that youths in their third decade constitute a source of hope, optimism and resilience as well as future hope for their political and economic systems. This paper therefore highlights young people who exhibit such features in their daily struggle through university and more so within the third decade of life.

#### IV. PERSPECTIVES FOR POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

The concept of healthy functioning or positive development is particularly relevant to the emerging-adulthood period because of the significant potential for positive change and redirection of life pathways observed during this time. 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. Recently, calls have been made for an increased focus on successful development in young people and how optimal developmental pathways can be promoted (O’Connor, Sanson, Toumbourou, Hawkins, Letcher, Williams, and Olsson, 2014).

In line with this notion of positive development, Grotberg (1999) earlier propounded that third decade youths who harness resilience can override their traumatic life experiences to become independent and responsible adults. He added that resilience is an attribute of positive development which if cultivated can promote the psychosocial well-being of future adults. Similarly third decade youths in the continent are mirrored through garden metaphors as “buds of hope and expectation” (Zimba, 2002), “gradually becoming” Erny (1973), socialized agents of their culture (Nsamenang, 2008) and key actors and agents of their development (Lo-oh, 2017).

#### V. CONCLUSION

Students display varying levels of resilience in their ability to have positive outcomes in the face of such a transition. Research supports the existence of a number of factors that have been associated with positive responses in the face of stress, including social support and having a close social network, taking care of one’s self physically as well as mentally, possessing particular skills (self-regulation, cognitive flexibility), and the style with which one thinks about past and future events; optimism, pessimism (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999).

Kumari & Gartia (2012) suggested that university students can be of great benefit to society by educating future generations with their acquired knowledge. For some students adjusting during the transition to college, the ability to maintain a positive perspective on one’s future helps promote resilience in difficult moments, providing a buffer against the negative impacts of stress and maintaining motivation to

achieve one's goals (Leary & DeRosier, 2012). According to Nelson & Padilla Walker (2013) young people who appear to be successfully navigating emerging adulthood tend to engage in identity exploration, develop internalization of positive values, participate in positive media use, engage in pro-social behaviours, report healthy relationships with parents, and engage in romantic relationships that are characterized by higher levels of companionship, worth, affection and emotional support.

From this perspective, positive psychologists suggest that studying the variables that promote positive growth and resilience in individuals without psychological distress may be as beneficial as studying the treatment of individuals who are already experiencing difficulties. With this in mind, the present paper sought to establish how hopeful thinking and self-efficacy promotes positive adaptation, youth flourishing and features related to blossoming and outcomes during a life transition faced by thousands of young people every year as they struggle through university life especially within the context of Cameroon where observations reveal political, economic, social, cultural and psychological blockades that may retard their transition into productive and successful futures adult roles.

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