



“Under pressure”: Negotiating Competing Demands in an Age of Uncertainty

By Hannah Dawson



A few years ago, during a year of ethnographic fieldwork with young un(der)employed men in a poor shack settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg, I found myself sitting in Senzo’s one-room shack on a foldout camping chair. It was a hot Wednesday afternoon. Popular R&B music was blaring into the air from the nearby tavern. Senzo sat on his double bed. Soon after I arrived, Senzo handed me an ornate invitation with gold foil on the sides and his name on it. It was an invitation to the wedding of his cousin that was set to take place the following weekend.

I asked Senzo if he planned to go. “I’m not going”, he told me, explaining that he had declined the invitation because, as he put it, “I don’t want to put more pressure on myself” describing the difficulties he already had paying rent, keeping up with outstanding debts, and supporting his girlfriend and children. Going to the wedding would require him to buy a fancy suit and a gift for the couple. This required money he didn’t have. The “pressure” Senzo described was not just the monetary cost of attending the wedding. It was also the feeling (what Senzo called “stress”) of being overburdened by competing demands on his money including buying consumer items, sending his children to good schools, and supporting family members.

To understand the continuous “pressure” young men like Senzo face requires we give attention to the changing nature of work and the changing world of families in contemporary South Africa. As I

show below the pressures young black un(der)employed men experience are at once economic and social given the pressure they face to not only “provide” for themselves and their families exists alongside a pressure to improve or “upgrade” their lives. As such, I show how the “income-demands gap” (a key catalyst of “pressure”) in young men’s lives is produced in and through specific (increasingly temporary rather than enduring) social relations and ties.

It is well known South Africa has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, with 59% of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years are currently unemployed. These figures pertain to the pre-lockdown phase (the first three months of 2020) and have only worsened due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which I cannot consider here. In a context where wage work is not only increasingly unavailable but also precarious, my on-going research demonstrates that while young men use a diverse range of strategies to get by—with many combining formal wage labour with informal entrepreneurship while also leveraging distributional claims on others both inside and outside of their households— their income is, like many urban dwellers, sporadic and unpredictable.

One of the striking consequences of the decline of wage work in South Africa is the increase in the number of unmarried people in their twenties and thirties who live in multigenerational family units. In particular, unemployment delays the setting up of an independent household, in some cases by decades. Many young people “survive unemployment” by staying in multigenerational households, especially in rural areas, to access the employment income or state transfers of other household members. The situation in urban areas is quite different with a growing shift toward smaller and more numerous households. This trend is intensified in urban informal settlements like Zandspruit where a growing number of people, especially young men, are ‘living solo’. Of one hundred young people (between the ages of 18-34) I surveyed in Zandspruit, the vast majority (87%) were unmarried but just over half (52%) had one or more children. Over half (56%) of these same youth lived in households of two or fewer with a further 25% ‘living solo’.

Further, in the majority of cases, young men did not live with their children. This reflects national trends that show 43% of all black children in the country live with their mother or maternal kin (often in rural areas) with little contact with their fathers (Hall and Sambu 2017). The shift to smaller households and ‘solo living’ (especially among young men) in urban areas must be seen in the context of mass unemployment, inadequate housing and low-marriage rates. It is these factors that also underpin the pervasive view in South Africa that young men are failing to support their families, and meet their obligations to their children.

Senzo was 27, single, and had been unemployed for four months at the time of the wedding he had been invited to. He had previously worked as a driver for butchery but quit during a disciplinary hearing that resulted from Senzo’s absence from work after a car accident. Senzo was living alone in a one-room rented shack that was not far from his grandmother’s yard where he had lived from the age of thirteen. Senzo had a new girlfriend at the time of this research and two daughters (age 8 and 3) who lived with their respective mothers. Senzo was staying afloat with support from his sister who worked as a receptionist, his grandmother who received a government pension, and some ad-hoc work with a local NGO.

Unlike some of the poorest people in Zandspruit, many of whom migrate to the area in search of work, Senzo had a long-established support network that allowed him to survive periods of unemployment. These relationships and forms of support allowed him to get by. They did not allow him to provide for his grandmother, girlfriend and daughters. Since losing his job, Senzo was no longer supporting his grandmother and sending money to the mother of his younger daughter every month. The pressure to support others was not necessarily lessened when Senzo had a more stable income. “Even though I’m working I’m always left with nothing”, he told me some months later when he found a part-time job as a soccer coach, describing how he often felt like he was “drowning” from

the multiple claims to his limited earnings.

It is important to recognize that the experience of pressure is not static. It is constantly shifting in response to changing incomes, demands, obligations and desires. My on-going research shows that while many young un(der)employed men long for the temporal stability of a wage job (compared to the erratic and unpredictable nature of informal earnings) they also recognised the increased social burden that came with the predictability of a wage. Mandla, another of my interlocutors, put it like this: 'Having a job, especially for men, carries a big weight, a big burden [...] but when you're hustling there is no fixed time [when people know] I have X amount of money in my bank account.' 'But', he continued, 'if you have a job, even the extended family, they will know that at the end of the month Mandla is going to get paid. [...] But when you're hustling there isn't really a plan to say "Hey, listen - we know you've got money"'. Seen this way, the temporal stability of the wage was often seen as a burden rather than an advantage for the young men I spent time with. At the same time, the erratic and unpredictable nature of informal earnings allowed them to hold onto more of their limited resources and, in some cases, have more say over what they did with their money.

Throughout my research in Zandspruit I heard young men described as "run[ning] away from their responsibilities" and failing to "make a commitment" to their children. The lives of young men like Senzo reveal a more complicated picture than that offered by the dominant portrayal of young men as 'stuck' and 'failing'. While most young men are severely constrained in their ability to meet their social obligations and attain the normative markers of adulthood—to build a home, get married, and reliably support a spouse and kids—they are not stuck in some kind of 'limbo' or extended state of non-adult. Instead, young men like Senzo are negotiating competing demands on their resources in a context of precarious and unpredictable earnings and fluid (often fraught) social relationships.

The "pressure" to provide for one's children, partners and families is the site of both aspiration and resentment as well as pride and humiliation. Young men in Zandspruit understood their obligations to their families as one of the prime areas for them to acquire or maintain a sense of masculine respect or status while also resenting the economic pressure this placed on them. Senzo often criticised the mothers of his children for only contacting him to "demand" money. "They won't phone me saying we miss you, come and visit us", he told me, "No, no no.

The only time they give me a call is when there is a reason [like a] school trip or something". Senzo's relationship with his older daughter was limited to short meet-ups at shopping malls where, as he put it, he is expected to "buy nice ice-creams and shoes". Senzo often expressed his frustration at only being able to spend time with his child if he could "spend" money. The situation with his younger daughter (who he lived with for the first year of her life) was slightly different. Her mother phoned him, sometimes daily, demanding financial support. "When I see the phone call I just switch off my phone", Senzo told me, describing the endless requests for money for nappies, school fees and other expenses. Senzo's decision to turn off his phone was an attempt to sidestep these economic claims but also the humiliation that came with being unable to offer financial support.

It was this burden and humiliation that lead some men to purposefully avoid seeing their children until they had money and, in some cases, being estranged from their children altogether. In a context where being a man remains inextricably tied up with financial provision, the stress of being unable to provide for others not only leads to feelings of failure but also contributes to increasing social atomization and gender-based violence (as highlighted in Nairobi).

The stress of being unable to provide for others was made worse by the tension young men experienced between using their money for immediate and more conspicuous purchases and forms of enjoyment and the obligation they felt towards their family and children. The tension between spending money on consumer goods versus meeting their social obligations was often felt most

acutely by those in employment or with a more regular source of income. Having a job not only came with an expectation to support one's family. It also involved the pressure to "show you are working", as one of my interlocutors put it, that involved acquiring and displaying desirable goods—from clothes and cell phones through to cars—that earmarked you as a person whose life was improving.

This desire to consume not only underscores the inequalities that pervade South Africa but also shows how the lives of young people throughout the continent are not simply structured by their limited means but by their desires and aspirations to get ahead. While wearing expensive clothes, owning a car, or being seen to drink expensive brands of alcohol might increase young men's social status it also made them vulnerable to accusations of misguided prioritisation of self over others and the present over the future. I heard this concern expressed most clearly in the phrase that someone was "forgetting where they come from". The phrase was most commonly directed at someone who was seen to be engaged in conspicuous consumption (such as the purchase of alcohol or new shoes) without "taking responsibility" for others and was thus seen to be prioritising their individual status over their families.

Senzo's reluctance to attend the wedding not only reflects the competing demands on his income but also the social and moral pressures that come from the tension young men face between improving their own lives and taking responsibility for others. The consequence of this tension is that young men have to tread a fine line between succumbing to the pressure to consume—in a context where not being able to wear nice clothes or getting take-outs signals a kind of social poverty—and looking after their social obligations to others. The feeling of being "under pressure" not only indexes the widespread feeling that comes from being overburdened by the multiplicity of economic demands young men experience but also the reality that certain aspirations to get head remain perpetually out of reach.

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