The intersections of identity, belonging and drug use disorder: struggles of male youth in post-apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The exclusionary principles of the apartheid nation undermined black South Africans’ value and weakened their sense of belonging. The transition to post-apartheid was marked by the absence of supportive structures to nurture a sense of belonging let alone form an identity. Today, young people suffer ‘wounded attachments’ to the past and multiple exclusions from the future. Young people, in the absence of conducive conditions for fostering a sense of belonging, face a crisis of making sense of who they are in the 25+ year-old democracy. This article explores the intersections of identity, belonging and drug use disorder through the narratives of eleven male youth (20–30 years) at Soshanguve SANCA Rehabilitation Centre. Overall, drug use disorder is a manifestation of deep structural issues that influence belonging and identity formation; and it doubles as a way of renegotiating identity as young people strive to escape or belong to socio-relational groups around them.

Struggles to belong in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa

Apartheid South Africa was designed in a way that excluded black (young) people, especially in the townships, from having a sense of belonging (Burns et al., 2015; Everatt, 2000). The divisive principles of the apartheid system undermined human beings’ intuitive desire to be accepted and valued by others emotionally and socially (Kumsa, 2006; Maswikwa, 2010). More than two decades into democracy, apartheid policies of systematic racial discrimination and segregation continue to have a deep and enduring influence on inequality in South Africa. As the post-apartheid government emphasized on deracialisation, major focus was on promoting black economic elite and middle class (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Consequently, government policies, practices and initiatives continue to enlarge class differences in society instead of mitigating and fulfilling the promise of equal opportunities.

To date, not much has changed for South African youth who struggle to surmount the brutal past and an uncertain future characterized by persistent poverty and inequality in the school environment for instance (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). The conditions for fostering a sense of belonging are largely absent in post-apartheid South Africa such that lack of a sense of belonging remains a serious concern in the country (Batisai, 2016; Burns et al., 2015; Swartz et al., 2012). This reality, inherited from the apartheid past, has witnessed the emergence of a sense of inferiority and constant feelings of being an outsider (Batisai, 2016). Today, young people continue to suffer ‘wounded attachments’ to the past and the multiple exclusions from the future which in turn have weakened their sense of belonging and identity formation (Burns et al., 2015). These realities warrant the interrogation of
socio-political structures in research that strives to comprehend notions of identity and belonging among the South African youth.

Structural unemployment and poverty as well as fractured families and communities emerge as the root causes of the lack of a sense of belonging among the youth in South Africa (Burns et al., 2015). Young people yearn to be valued, noticed and have stable and meaningful connections within their social and home environments which provide structural support and appropriate bridging relationships critical in helping them develop a sense of belonging. When these structures fail, young people often seek new ways and create their own spaces for forming and expressing their identity and forging their own meanings of belonging (Burns et al., 2015; United Nations, 2008). For instance, some young people resort to anti-social forms of recognition, as they perceive the consequences of delinquent behaviour better than feeling isolated and lonely. Identity formation is a process in which ‘individuals make sense of their identity based on a combination of their individual characteristics as well as the feedback they receive in their interactions with significant others in their social environment’ (Jacobs & Collair, 2017, p. 1). Even though identity formation is an individual process of making meaning, social experiences play an important role in shaping a sense of identity.

Identities develop, change and are made visible in relation to others; and are communicated when we interact with the outside world (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). A sense of belonging is vital in shaping youth identity because ‘youth period’ serves as a time for developing one’s self-esteem and inner capacity to give direction to one’s life (Byarugaba, 2014). Thus, young people face a crisis of making sense of who they are as they try to escape lack of sense of belonging or strive to belong. Goodenow (1993) defines a sense of belonging as ‘the extent to which individuals feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in a social environment’ (p. 80). Several scholars not only re-echo this definition, unpacking that the social environment that needs to accept an individual can be a society, group or system, but they point at the social constructedness of belonging (Karyn, 2019; Klaaren, 2010; Youkhana, 2015). This social constructedness renders belonging a dynamic context-specific concept that individuals constantly negotiate and construct through various intersecting identifying categories of class and sex among others (Yuval-Davis, 2011). In the absence of a sense of belonging, an individual suffers grief, loneliness, depression or anxiety (Osterman, 2000). The process becomes winding and synonymous with struggles as the rejected comprehends and tries to deal with ‘intense longings to be-long’ (Kumsa, 2006, p. 380).

The absence of a sense of belonging negatively impacts on South African youth who associate with bad company and engage in inhumane activities such as trafficking as a survival strategy (Byarugaba, 2014). Others indulge and inappropriately use substances as they try to negotiate their identity by either conforming within the inner group or forge an identity with the out-group. This is also exacerbated by the culture of materialism that has become a discursive formation of youth identities resulting in dissatisfaction and the alienation of young people who cannot afford luxurious things (Dolby, 2001; Kasser, 2002). It is against this backdrop that belonging in this article refers to both a lack of a sense of belonging and the desire to belong. Focus is particularly on male youth because studies have revealed that although the basic need to feel worthwhile to others is significant among young people, male youth are the most affected relative to their female counterparts (Department of Basic Education, 2013; Liebenberg et al., 2016).

The intersections of identity, belonging and youth drug use disorder

To date, research that explores the determinants of substance use disorder among the youth in South Africa has not fully framed a sense of belonging as a central contributing factor (Mnguni, 2014; Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014). Different social factors like the school environment and family relations are some of the determinants that have been explored both internationally and nationally (Burns et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2007; United Nations, 2008; Willms, 2003). Nevertheless, experiencing ostracism and the desire to be accepted in social groups underlie and interconnect with most of these causes of youth drug-use disorder. This article advances the argument that lack of a sense of
belonging and the desire to belong should not be underestimated when looking at different determinants of youth drug use disorder. The process of belonging begins with the emotional attachment and social relationships that an individual establishes in the family, the peer group, and the community. Consequently, lack of acceptance and attachment to these social entities leads to delinquency in the form of drug use disorder and leave young people to navigate their social world and negotiate their identity (Burns et al., 2015; Langhert & Abens, 2009).

This article takes cognizance of a group of unnoticed youth that has developed within South African communities as society marginalizes, stigmatizes and labels individuals struggling with drug use disorder (Mnguni, 2014). Society views drug use disorder among the youth as a criminal act, overlooking the fact that it is primarily a social issue. Similarly, scholars have explored substance use disorder among the youth in South Africa in the context of the ‘criminalization approach’ such that the fight against drug use concentrates on criminalizing and arresting drug dealers and users (Hodza, 2013). The approach serves the interest of the country relative to that of users demonstrating that concentration is on what Merton (1938) and other sociological structural theorists term the structure instead of agency (the individuals).

To bridge the theoretical gap alluded to above, this article explores the interplay between individuals and different societal structures since these two aspects are intertwined (Lemert, 2017). The article first discusses the relevance of the structure-agency theory in revealing the underestimation of a sense of belonging as a determinant of youth drug use disorder and the apartheid legacy – structural forces that continue to affect youth identity and the stigmatization of youth who use drugs. In doing so, the article interrogates ways in which the post-1994 era and different societal structures contribute to how young people forge a sense of belonging and form their identities. Such interrogation prepares the article to assess the overall influence lack of a sense of belonging and the desire to belong have on youth who use drugs and how these shape youth identities.

**Theoretical framework and methodological processes**

The research was executed within the sociological structuration theory drawn from the seminal work of Giddens (1984), which argues that human behaviour is a product of the interaction between agency (individuals) and the structure (societal attributes). The theory maintains that the societal attributes either influence or limit the choices and opportunities of individuals whereas in turn, the individuals act in response, thereby shaping human behaviour and society at large (Lemert, 2017). The relationship between the individual and society is central to this theory such that social phenomenon is more than just some random individual acts. Rather, it is determined by structural or social forces such that structure is not something that exists outside of the individual (Giddens, 1984). Structural forces, in the context of this article, include apartheid and post-apartheid governance, past and present family relations, the school environment; and our focus is particularly on how young people’s interactions with and within these various structures impact their sense of belonging and influence drug use and identity formation. Giddens (1984), who preludes that people make society with resources and practices inherited from the past, informs the selection of these structures. The theory further states that human beings respond in different ways to different situations such that interaction plays a great role in shaping human behaviour as individuals shape their own responsiveness depending on situations. Consequently, people become what they are through their social ties and relations (Hedin, 2012; Langhert & Abens, 2009).

Guided by the structure-agency theory, the research utilized a qualitative methodology to explore the interconnection between a sense of belonging and youth drug use disorder and how the intersection influences identity formation among male youth aged between 20 and 30 years. The approach granted the male youth a platform to share their lived experiences and views of negotiating identity and a sense of belonging in the context of drug use disorder. Soshanguve SANCA Rehabilitation Centre, a branch of the SANCA national organization, was chosen as the research site because it encompasses both licit and illicit drugs in defining drugs and acknowledges the rise in
youth drug use disorder. Moreover, the rehabilitation centre was strategically selected because of its location in the northern part of the City of Pretoria where male youth drug use is a major concern (Matsena, 2017; Nthite, 2006). The area is experiencing the scourge of both illicit drugs such as nyope also known as whoonga¹ and the use of legal medications such as antiretroviral, painkillers, and cough syrup. For instance, the ‘bluetooth phenomenon’² among the youth who use drugs riddled Pretoria North, especially Soshanguve, in 2017 (Dibakwane, 2017). Pretoria North comprises both townships, notably Mamelodi, Marabastad, Soshanguve and Ga-Rankuwa, and suburbs such as Arcadia, Brooklyn, Ashlea Gardens and Alphen Park. The rehabilitation centre’s operations are not limited to these northern sites as some of its patients come from surrounding areas like Hammanskraal and Brits while others come from Johannesburg and as far as Mpumalanga Province.

To conform to the ethics of doing research involving human beings and sensitive topics, a formal bureaucratic application to access the centre was made and approved through the SANCA national office; and our university’s Research Ethics Committee granted ethical clearance in 2018. As it is a prerequisite in social research, ethical considerations like informed consent, voluntarism, anonymity, and debriefing were ensured. Eleven participants were chosen from the two clinics based on the criteria of one being male and between the ages of 20 and 30 years. Since the research question specified participants’ traits and identifying categories in terms of gender, age and background, homogeneous sampling was the type of purposive sampling used. Due to the homogeneity or commonality in the participants’ lived experiences, interviews were conducted up to a point where no new ideas were emerging – a point defined in research as data saturation. Despite the sensitive nature of the topic, a qualitative approach allowed the gathering of rich and in-depth data through semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews in this phenomenological study afforded the participants the opportunity to respond in their own words and to elaborate while allowing the researcher to keep the interview within the parameters set by the objectives of the research.

With the consent of the eleven participants, the researcher³ recorded all the interviews using a digital audio recorder to capture verbatim narratives, took notes and censored photographs for data analysis purposes. Thereafter, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and emerging themes were grouped using thematic analysis, which involves identifying common recurring issues and the main themes that summarize all the views that have been collected (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Thematic analysis also ensured the trustworthiness of the research findings based on a synthesis of commonalities in the participants’ lived experiences as opposed to listing of findings from one participant over others. Thematic data analysis began fully alert to the reality that there is no value-free research. As such, self-reflection and scrutiny were key in ensuring the acknowledgement of values and epistemological assumptions that could impact the results. The researchers were mindful of the realities that being a black (African) person in a country marked by the persistence of racial divides rooted in the race-driven apartheid system as well as living in a society where drug use is criminalized could potentially influence the results. Given that the researchers did not have personal experience of the phenomena under study beyond theoretical and empirical evidence drawn from secondary data, the results are entirely based on the narratives of the participants.

The following sections juxtapose literature-based theoretical findings with empirical narratives of male youth housed at the Soshanguve SANCA Rehabilitation Centre. The analysis allows the article to further draw conclusions and recommendations from a synthesis of the theoretical (secondary data and the sociological structuration theory) and the empirical (primary data) based on both latent and manifest findings. Thus, the article presents the emerging thematic findings as opposed to predetermined content, and the analysis illuminates how these findings either challenge or concur with existing secondary data and the sociological structuration theory.

Juxtaposing empirical and theoretical findings

Thematic analysis in this article entailed identifying and analysing themes emerging from the participants’ lived experiences such as idleness related to unemployment; household composition
and socio-economic realities; materialism; and relational interactions in social spaces. Thematic analysis of the eleven participants’ narratives revealed that a sense of belonging is crucial in keeping young people away from drugs and shaping their identity. The participants related a sense of belonging to various contexts such as the family environment, the current era of globalization, the school environment and peer relational interactions. The participants also problematized the post-apartheid era for contributing significantly to lack of a sense of belonging and identity formation crisis among the youth. As such, the themes emerging from the empirical findings are juxtaposed with several markers of youth’s daily life in post-apartheid South Africa. These markers were identified in various studies to show the interplay on youth sense of belonging, drug use disorder and identity.

**Poverty, unemployment, identity and belonging among the youth**

All the eleven participants from Soshanguve SANCA Rehabilitation Centre stressed that unemployment-related idleness resulted in boredom and consequently, drug use disorder. The findings expose how the divisive apartheid structures continue to have an influence on the youth and their identities central to their sense of belonging to the 25+ year-old democracy. This legacy is evidenced by the persistent poverty and inequality that young people, despite the promise of democracy, battle with, in South Africa today (Byarugaba, 2014). Economic inequality is a major factor that has shattered the youth’s vision, hope and compromised the moral decisions they make (Byarugaba, 2014). Youth unemployment is a concern in the country, as statistics indicate that young people aged 15–34 years constituted 63.3% of the total number of unemployed people in the first quarter of 2020 (Statistics South Africa, 2020). The South African economy has not generated sufficient employment opportunities to absorb the growing labour force; hence, many youth remain unemployed (Statistics South Africa, 2020; Van Der Byl, 2014). Thus, poverty and inequality compel young people to navigate complex social spaces as they try to make sense of who they are or who they identify as in the context of unemployment.

A closer interrogation of the post-apartheid inequalities explicitly reveals that the structural stress of unemployment and socio-economic challenges push the youth into excessive drinking of alcohol and use of drugs – a habit through which they reconstitute their identities as an undignified and unemployed category of the population (Byarugaba, 2014). This observation, which was echoed by all the eleven participants, is evident in Blessmore’s and Praise’s narratives below:

Boredom can be a problem if you have nothing to do during the day and as a result you can end up abusing drugs. (Blessmore, 22 years, 30 May 2018)

You see, like me, I do not have a job, I am at a rehab and when I get out, I will stay at home, get bored, nothing to do, it is making me use [drugs]. (Praise, 24 years, 30 May 2018)

Praise seemed concerned that it would be difficult for him to maintain his sobriety after completing the treatment insinuating that he might be tempted to use drugs after leaving the rehabilitation centre because he is not working. Besides the boredom, the participants observed that youth unemployment coupled with that of their parents was the underlying cause of poverty in many families and it led to drug use disorder. They indicated that young people sometimes refuse to embrace their family’s financially disadvantaged position, central to the socio-economic realities and identity of that family, and resort to stealing to provide for those families. The narrative below substantiates the strong link between poverty, stealing and drug use disorder:

Poverty is the first thing that leads us to drugs because if you come from a background where there is poverty or hunger, you would want your family to have something. For example, you know that my father does not work, my mother does not work, and I do not have a job, the thing that I must do is what? I must go to the streets and hustle and hustling means that I have to rob people, hijacking, things like that. At the end of the day, you would not do those things sober, you would want to take substances to kill your heart, have a block. (Craig, 23 years, 15 June 2018)
Young people’s behaviour of stealing and drug use becomes a way of negotiating their identity with those in-groups who also indulge in such. The participants’ narratives echo the observation that youth who still reside with their economically deprived parents are at an increased risk of engaging in substance use (Morojele et al., 2010; Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014). Their situations cause them to live under chronic stress, which consequently leads to risky substance use. When analysed within the structuration theoretical framework, youth behaviour of drug use and identity thereof become an act that is influenced by unemployment as a societal structure rather than a mere random one. Their agency of acting independent of the structure is limited as they are compelled to find ways to survive in the midst of massive unemployment, which often entails identifying with peers who steal and use drugs to ‘survive’.

**Consumerism/materialism, belonging and youth identity formation**

The participants identified materialism as having an impact on young people’s sense of belonging and, consequently, pushing them to use substances as a way of negotiating their identity. The participants highlighted that fashion has become central to young people’s identity in this era of globalization. Trending clothing brands such as Nike, Adidas and Italian designer clothes seem to define fashion; yet the participants on one hand remarked how expensive these are but simultaneously acknowledged that every youngster wants to be regarded as fashionable. The narrative below confirms that this negatively impacted on young people’s sense of belonging in relation to drug use disorder and their identity formation.

Sometimes it is the thing of competition, small things like clothes, expensive things. Just imagine kids who afford expensive things and a standard someone just like me. They feel this peer-pressure and you know using drugs will temporarily ease your pain. (Marshall, 28 years, 29 May 2018)

The analysis above echoes the observation that today’s aggressive marketing of goods targeted at young people has increasingly led them to link their identities to the possession of material goods (Eckersley, 2005). The culture of materialism among the youth is a consequence of globalization that is rooted in the concept of free market. Eckersley’s (2005) argument around materialism and alienation seems to resonate with what is currently happening in the broader South African context. This is evidenced by the youth group called **izikhothane** that has emerged and marked some of the South African townships. ‘**Izikhothane is an urban youth culture that involves the preoccupation with extreme forms of materialism, fatalistic obsession with fashionable clothing brands and expensive alcohol and the culture of burning money**’ (Mchunu, 2017, p. 132). A study conducted in Durban on youth identities also revealed that global flows of popular culture have become critical locations for the discursive formation of youth identities (Dolby, 2001). Burns et al. (2015) found that not having possessions like expensive phones and designer clothes negatively affects South African youth’s sense of belonging. A study of youth identity in America also established that young people befriended one another based on physical appearance (Lemert, 2017). The consequence of such an emphasis on material things is that those who do not afford these goods do not belong to peer-groups and fall in the trap of using substances to overcome this sense of exclusion.

The argument that globalization is indirectly contributing to youth drug-use disorder and identity crisis is solidified by the observation that the origins of most trending expensive items that the **izikhothane** identify themselves with are traced back to international multinational companies that flocked South Africa subsequent to globalization’s free market concept. Young people who are unemployed struggle to afford the desired extravagant life such that they experience alienation in this era of globalization. Thus, for marginalized young people who cannot afford that kind of life, the **izikhothane** culture can be viewed as a quest to belong, form and shape identities. This negatively affects their sense of belonging compelling them to resort to drug use to escape the exclusion.

The participants highlighted how unstable the environments in which young people grow up in are and how this influences drug use and shapes their identity. One of the participants argued that
growing up in townships makes people independent as they fend for themselves to survive the difficult living conditions:

... you know how township life is like. We grew up in unstable environments so there is lack of trust, lack of communication, lack of love you know. Growing up like that you just have to man up for yourself because each man is for himself and when you fail to make ends meet, you end up in drugs. (Craig, 23 years, 15 June 2018)

Craig’s narrative re-echoes the observation that the apartheid nation ensured the exclusion of young people, especially in the townships, from having a sense of belonging (Burns et al., 2015; Everatt, 2000). The legacies of inequality and poverty persist among black people in the townships making it difficult for young people who grow up in such environments to negotiate their identity and understand who they are. Peer-pressure underpinned by economic marginalization and exclusion limits youth’s agency of acting independently, renders youth vulnerable and compels some of them to negotiate their lack of a sense of belonging by using drugs. The argument is made fully alert to the reality that young people are not homogenous as some of them might overlook material things and physical appearances when choosing their friends.

Navigating social spaces in an effort to shape identity

Emerging out of the participants’ narratives is the reality that young people’s social relations with their families and the school environment play a vital role in enacting a sense of belonging, keeping them away from drugs and shaping their identity. Close social relations are a basis for attachment, a source of identity, a positive sense of belonging, and a central dimension in people’s lives (Berkman et al., 2000; Olsson, 2011). As such, strained social relations are adverse to individuals’ wellbeing (Bond et al., 2001; Laftman & Ostberg, 2006). However, there is a moral crisis today in South Africa due to the breakdown of families, poor education system and income inequality. The following sub-themes focus on family structures, the school environment and individual-peer relations core to youth identity and sense of belonging.

Family structures and their influence on youth identity and belonging

The participants’ narratives illuminated that family composition or structures significantly influence youth drug-use disorder as a sense of belonging within the family keeps young people away from drugs. That notwithstanding, most South African families are structured in such a way that many children do not grow up with both parents. Research, for instance, shows that divorce within black African households in South Africa went from 24.3% in 2003 to 42% in 2016 (Statistics South Africa, 2016). Divorce and inter-parents conflicts have an impact on monitoring and disciplinary strategies, which adversely affect young people whose distressed experiences ultimately manifest through physical and psychological symptoms. The narratives of participants revealed a more impactful way in which the separation of parents creates tension that drives the children to using substances. Below are some substantive quotes from the participants:

This thing of the mom wanting to stay somewhere and the dad staying somewhere, and you find out that as a child you want to stay with this one but the other one does not like that. This will make you do bad things like smoking because you do not feel comfortable but the parent is just being forceful so there is nothing you can do as a child; you just have to succumb to that. I wanted to stay with my father they did not allow me that at court because the court was saying that I am still young, but I had my reasons why I wanted to stay with my dad. And I am very much sure that if I had stayed with him, even today I would not know like how drugs taste like. (Thato, 25 years, 15 June 2018)

Besides testing, it was like maybe releasing stress or anger because me I am someone who is aggressive based on my history, my parents divorcing. It left me with anger, which made me to fight with people, always aggressive, always behaving abnormal so by that moment when I am using, I do not have that anger, it was gone, I felt like I could communicate with other people, life was normal. (Craig, 23 years, 15 June 2018)
The narratives reinforce the observation that children who experience parents’ divorce or separation have a high risk of indulging in substance use (Harland et al., 2002). As such, family cohesion and positive attachment protect against youth drug-use disorder while family conflicts disrupt youth behaviour and push them into substance use (Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014). Abusive family relationships, in the form of severe physical and sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence, are also an antecedent to behavioural and psychological problems, including drug use disorder (Mokoena, 2002) in an effort to alleviate the stress caused by poor relations.

The participants’ narratives further revealed that separation occurs not only through parents’ divorce, but also from birth for children born out of wedlock who are subsequently raised by single parents. The Department of Social Development (2012) highlights that ‘more than 40% of households in South Africa are single parent-headed and these single parents are overwhelmingly African, female and unemployed’ (p. 16). The absence of the other parent, especially father absence, which is a serious challenge in South Africa (Chauke & Khunou, 2014), was identified by participants as a factor contributing to youth drug use disorder. Why, because a present father plays an important part in a child’s life as he gives the child a sense of belonging (Eddy et al., 2013). The observation was echoed by the participants quoted below, who grew up in the absence of their fathers. As a result, they lived a stressful life that led to substance use:

… the fact that my father was not staying with us … so I used to suffer a lot, not get most of my needs because my mother was not working. My father had other children and had another wife where he was staying. That was really stressing me and pushed me to smoking. (Xolani, 30 years, 1 June 2018)

You know I only met him [his father] for one day and that was it. We used to call each other but he never took any guts to come and visit me. He did not even come even once and I think that is one of the things that made me to smoke again. (Mashudu, 27 years, 29 May 2018)

My father passed away when I was still young, but my mother tried all her best to give me a good life, I never even felt that thing of saying I do not have a father except when I was at school and my friends started talking about their fathers. That way I would start thinking that I do not have one and would start thinking that if I had a father maybe he would have reprimanded me, maybe shown me how I am supposed to do things and maybe I would be a right person and not here today. But it is not like I was saying that my mother is not doing her best, but you know how fathers are, they try by all means to push, to be forceful. (Maps, 21 years, 15 June 2018)

Clearly, lack of a sense of belonging and the desire to belong, as influenced by the father’s absence, contributes to youth drug use disorder and the formation of new identities. Drawing from the structuration theoretical framework, a dialectic relation can be noted between the family and the youth, as these two parties affect each other. Family structure influences youth’s behaviour that, in turn, affects family relationships. Youth exercise their agency through taking drugs to overcome the stress caused by absent fathers and form their own identities with those around them. The findings on family composition speak to the observation that single mothers place fewer demands on their children and engage in less monitoring and disciplinary strategies than two-parent families (Steketee et al., 2013). This is of great concern because family supervision in South Africa is likely to reduce male youth’s chances of using illegal drugs by 38% (Meghdadpour et al., 2012). Parents who are supportive expect compliance with rules, show consistency and fairness in their discipline, encourage their children to become independent, and protect their children against drugs. Conversely, negative parenting practices increase the risk of substance use and hinder youth’s sense of belonging.

The participants further identified biological ties as a factor that contributes to lack of a sense of belonging within the family environment. Belive relayed the impact of adoption on his life: ‘… but the biggest thing for me is that when I was small, I was adopted. So, I grew up all my life feeling like I am isolated, not worthy anything.’ Closely related to the issue of adoption is the absence of biological siblings that is having ‘siblings with different biological parents’; Mashudu buttressed this:
I used to feel isolated more especially towards my sister and brother because I do not share a father with them... So maybe I am cursed with this you know; I am like a tomato in a packet of potatoes. This drove me into smoking more. (Mashudu, 27 years, 29 May 2018)

In addition to losing loved ones by virtue of parents’ separation or divorce, the participants’ narratives concur with literature that reveals the second dimension of losing loved ones to death. Believe acknowledged that the loss of loved ones through death by natural/unnatural causes contributed to substance use:

The other friend I lost, of 15 years friendship had a car accident on his 21st birthday. So that triggered me to start using again, then I lost a son one year after that and I used heroin for 1 year. I had a motorbike accident and after that no more drugs for two years, then I relapsed again on my son's birthday. (Believe, 25 years, 4 June 2018)

Believe indicated that losing a loved one caused him to start using drugs again, despite his efforts to quit drugs forever. Considering Believe’s age (25 years), and the life challenges that he has gone through to date, one can infer that his drug use is a way of ‘self-medicating’. He elaborated that he had a plan to check-in an institution every year on his late son’s birthday, because he usually relapses. When interviewed as an in-patient, he indicated that he checked-in the rehabilitation centre as a clean patient to avoid relapsing. When interviewed further on the 4th of June 2018, Believe indicated that he had just checked-in on the 3rd of May 2018 because his late son’s birthday was on the 10th of May. Similarly, Do-it referred to two boys in his neighbourhood who have resorted to smoking nyaope because they have lost both parents.

Overall, when analysed within the sociological structuration theory, youth drug use disorder does not just emerge randomly. Rather, it is the manifestation of deep structural issues within the family and a symptom of an ongoing pattern of youth development problems that influence identity formation. Young people’s living environments are part of the important factors that determine their quality of life and identity (Statistics South Africa, 2013). Combined, poverty, unemployment and home environment aspects like family violence, poor houses and orphanhood are some of the societal structures that create psychological distress, impact youth agency, affect youth’s sense of belonging and shape their identities (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019).

**Shaping youth identity and belonging within the school environment**

The school environment is an important context where identity shaping takes place (Jacobs & Collair, 2017). However, studies on a sense of belonging, drug use and identity formation within the school environment have focused on the individual at the expense of the social context (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Burns et al., 2015; Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014). Personality has been identified as a key determinant of a sense of belonging within educational institutions. The lack of self-esteem and confidence at school contributes considerably to youth drug-use disorder and identity shaping. In a study conducted in Grabouw, Western Cape, youth revealed that they had low self-esteem and that substance use helped them to feel better (Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014). When one’s sense of belonging within educational institutions is affected, using drugs becomes either a way of suspending negative self-image and subjective experience or a source of distraction and relief from the unpleasant reality of feeling estranged. The narrative below echoed this when the participant reflected on his relational interaction with peers and teachers during his school days:

It was not easy to mix with them, I am not a talkable [sic] guy, me I am a shy guy but when I smoke, I feel like I am owning the whole world. (Praise, 24 years, 30 May 2018)

The analysis above does not however mean that one must overlook the school environment as a space for social interaction where identity is shaped. Another study conducted in the Western Cape revealed that special needs schools are viewed as schools for children who can only use their hands but not mind (Jacobs & Collair, 2017). These marginalizing stereotypical constructions made the learners feel inferior, embarrassed to attend the school and strive to negotiate their identity within the environment. Though Jacobs and Collair (2017) study does not reveal drug use as a way of
escapism, other studies have observed that feeling estranged within a social environment pushes young people into drug use as a way of creating their identity and belonging which they failed to secure within the school environment (Burns et al., 2015; United Nations, 2008). In line with the literature, the narratives below reveal how the school environment failed the participants:

You see even schools … name-calling and giving children some silly names based on who you are and the kind of a family that you come from. Even when making an example, they use him as an example. His shoes or whatever. They will be doing this unaware that this thing is emotionally killing a child. It starts emotional and then manifest into the physical because these kids will always be under pressure and a lot of stress. It starts at a young age, at school, other children in the street name-calling him and then he will separate himself from others and when he finds drugs, he finds comfort. (Marshall, 29 May 2018)

They [school authorities] once caught me with marijuana and they suspended me. From the way I see it, they were supposed to try and ask first why I was doing it, if I had any problems and maybe how they can help with the problems than to just judge me and expel me from school. If they had done that maybe even today, I wouldn’t be here. (Maps, 21 years, 15 June 2018)

Teacher–student interaction is another important aspect of instilling a sense of belonging within the school environment (Jacobs, 2017). Teachers are central in motivating, supporting and nurturing learners thereby instilling a positive sense of belonging that keeps them away from drugs as learners identify with the in-group. However, that sense of belonging is negatively affected as teachers perpetuate notions of ‘othering’ in the school environment. Jacobs (2017) has observed that efforts to create diversity and acknowledge differences are in vain since the teaching staff still discriminate learners along racial lines, similar to the apartheid days. Marshall, in line with the literature, relayed:

Yes, I was a naughty kid but that does not mean that I was also supposed to be the prime suspect whenever something went wrong. Mostly, it was this thing of apartheid, especially when I was attending a school in Eldoraigne. (Marshall, 28 years, 29 May 2018)

Marshall was sharing his experience in one of the white-dominated schools where he always felt victimized because of his race, whenever something went wrong within the school premises. One can argue that such victimization affects belonging as the victimized young person ends up having an identity crisis within such an environment, which might consequently lead to drug use. A study on young people’s sense of belonging within educational institutions revealed that students with a low sense of belonging engaged in disruptive behaviour and exerted a negative influence on other students (Willms, 2003). Literature shows that poor performance, repetition of a grade and poor involvement in school activities, among other factors, cause a negative sense of belonging and some of learners turn to drugs within the school environment to escape this feeling; thereby negotiating their identity with the out-group that also indulges (Flisher et al., 2003; Steketee et al., 2013). It is therefore the teacher’s duty to create an environment that recognizes differences among learners because failure to do so creates notions of inferiority and alienation, which may lead to drug use as a way of exercising agency and renegotiating identity.

**Individual-peer relations core to youth identity and a sense of belonging**

The participants framed a sense of belonging to/with peers as crucial in keeping young people away from drugs and shaping their identity. They noted that commonality was the basis for having a positive feeling of a sense of belonging. Believe highlighted that it was hard to share experiences with peers when he was growing up because nobody came from the same background as him and for that reason, he always felt isolated. Shatani and Craig held the same view:

I met my friends through soccer, they were not smoking so I saw them as kids because I had started smoking so I just left them because I just saw that they are living behind time, felt lonely around them and left them and started befriending those who were smoking. (Shatani, 20 years, 30 May 2018)

The friends that I have now are the friends that we are going the same journey, same route. I have finally made friends here at SANCA based on the fact that we are in the same situations. (Craig, 23 years, 15 June 2018)
The participants noted that having some differences with peers creates notions of isolation that result in experiencing a low sense of belonging, which in their case pushed them to use substances. This is in line with Mudavanhu and Schenck (2014) view that individuals who do not find comfort in people around them tend to use drugs, though their study emphasized more on peer-pressure than a sense of belonging as a contributing factor. From both the empirical and theoretical findings, it was noted that feeling estranged from a group of peers pushes one to use drugs thereby negotiating their identity within the context of others who also use substances. In line with the observation that lack of a sense of belonging and the desire to belong within groups can influence young people’s behaviour (Burns et al., 2015), the participants mentioned that having a low sense of belonging drives young people to drugs, as they try to escape the lack of attachment within groups of friends. Blessmore relayed:

Young people can find comfort, which they do not find in those around them, on drugs. (Blessmore, 22 years, 30 May 2018)

Most participants also highlighted that young people sometimes use substances to live up to their peers who are already using drugs. Mashudu admitted that young people often start misusing drugs at school as a way of trying to fit in with friends and to be regarded as cool.

I started smoking cigarettes; it was only a thing of trying to fit in with my friends because they were all smoking cigarettes. Because I liked their company, I wanted to fit to be like them, you know, I then joined to smoke dagga with them. Like if you do not smoke, you do not fit to be with us. (Mashudu, 27 years, 29 May 2018)

We succumb to peer pressure. The thing of saying so and so is smoking and I am not, he will call me a coward, you see, that is peer pressure. (Shatani, 20 years, 30 May 2018)

Drawing from the theoretical framework guiding this study, it can be argued that the desire to belong in peer groups is a societal attribute (structure) that impacts on youth substance-use disorder. Through interaction with peers, youth’s agency is limited as they strive to please and be accepted by their peers. One can conclude that youth’s use of substances – influenced by the desire to belong in peer groups – is not a random individual act; it is influenced by a social structural force. Thus, as alluded to earlier, Jacobs and Collair (2017) frame the school environment as a context where identity shaping takes place.

**Concluding discussion and recommendations**

Drawing from both the empirical and theoretical findings of the study, the article argues that identity and belonging are indeed historically and socially situated. The article has revealed that despite the transition to democracy, the post-1994 era is still marked and influenced by the legacies of the apartheid system. The participants pointed at the challenge of poverty and inequality that affects young people’s sense of belonging to the 25+ year-old democracy – factors which particularly push youth in townships to use drugs as a way of renegotiating their identity. The persistent apartheid ideology of white privilege alienates most young black people and leaves them to negotiate their identity by using substances as a way of exercising agency. Hence the inference that the ‘born free’ label is more aspirational than real because of limited opportunities offered by a society still deeply structured by the old racial hierarchy of apartheid that prevents the so-called ‘born frees’ from renegotiating and constructing their identity (Norgaard, 2015).

Beyond the historical legacies, the article interrogated social contexts where primary and secondary socialization take place in ways that shape youth identity and influence their sense of belonging. Although the article analysed the school environment, peer groups and society, it singles out the impact the family has on youth identity and belonging because it is the only context where both primary and secondary socialization take place. Socialization plays a significant role in shaping youth behaviour, and the youth age is a stage where young people’s morals can be easily influenced negatively and positively (Amonini & Donovan, 2006). Thus, family relations and structures are
central to youth socialization because a strong feeling of attachment to the family restrains young people from using drugs. Hirsch’s theory of social control notes that lack of attachment between young people and their parents is the central determinant of delinquent behaviour (Ford, 2005). The attachment and support are determined by the amount of time parents spend with their children, the degree of communication between the two and trust issues.

Despite being central to youth socialization, many parents spend much of their time at work due to the current money-dominated economy. For instance, 52.2% of mothers and 90.7% of fathers living with their biological children are economically active (Statistics South Africa, 2013) while those who are unemployed resort to both formal and informal entrepreneurship to improve their livelihoods (Warren, 2017). Childcare was historically women’s responsibility (Rabe, 2017) but the rising feminization of the work has led to the marketization of childcare within households (Smit, 2014). Consequently, children spend more time with domestic workers than with their parents and domestic workers also emerge as absent mothers who spend more time at work and less time with their children (Batisai, 2017; Sibanda, 2019). Uninvolved and hostile parents negatively affect the child-parent bond leaving the children to negotiate their identity in a context of low self-esteem and no sense of attachment or belonging such that they resort to anti-social forms of recognition, including drug use (Burns et al., 2015; Steketee et al., 2013; Swartbooi, 2013; United Nations, 2008).

Overall, the article acknowledges that the conditions for fostering a sense of belonging and forming an identity are absent in South Africa as young people still find themselves trapped in unstable family environments and discriminating school environments as well as marginalizing post-apartheid opportunities that exacerbate the alienation of the youth. Hence the inference that youth substance use disorder is not a random individual act; rather, it is influenced by social forces that instil a sense of not belonging and consequently, young people deploy substance use as a way of negotiating and renegotiating their identity.

The question ‘how and who the participants at Soshanguve SANCA Rehabilitation Centre identify as’ becomes central to the empirical conclusion on identity formation among these young people. The participants argued that peers play a significant role in identity formation as they spend most of their time with them and in this case, they become part of that group by indulging in drugs to escape alienation. Consequently, young people alienated from the family and school environments either identify as the in-group that uses drugs in order to belong or the out-group that refrains from drug use. These in-group and out-group identities stemming from alienation resonate with structural notions of inequality, poverty and youth unemployment, which are understood in the context of consumerism/materialism and identity formation in the broader South African society. In his publication titled ‘The High Price of Materialism’, Kasser (2002) notes that materialism resulted in dissatisfaction and negative emotions such as alienation, depression, anger, and anxiety.

Young people on one hand identify as/with the out-group of those who also do not afford such a materialistic way of life but simultaneously identify as/with the in-group that engages in substance use in order to belong to such group and escape from the structural alienation. Most of the young people identify themselves as ‘ama 2000’, which refers to South Africa’s Centennials a close-knit generation born after the year 2000 whose close interaction capitalizes on the digital age facilitated by the ever-evolving technology (Phala, 2020). Ideally, the connectivity should allow easy and quick sharing of progressive ideas relative to then (Mashilo, n.d.) but the youth in this study find themselves using it to engage with each other and construct an identity deeply steeped in drug use as they cope with structural alienation.

The realities articulated in this article call for structural support in the form of encouragement and targeted entrepreneurial funding aimed at addressing unemployment-related idleness, poverty and inequality among the youth and eventually keep them away from drugs. Thus, support is needed for many young people because risky drug use behaviour is often a direct effect of the financially deprived family environments that they live in. To conclude, the article reiterates the importance of macro-level research that further explores the intersections of identity, a sense of belonging and youth drug use disorder to generate an in-depth understanding of how youth negotiate and
reconstitute their identity in different pockets of South Africa and other contexts beyond the boundaries of this country.

Notes

1. A widespread street drug, which is a mixture of dagga and some detergents (Mokwena, 2015).
2. A drug user who has money buys nyope, smokes it, draws his own blood using a syringe and injects the vein of the one who has not smoked to share the drug.
3. The first author conducted fieldwork.
4. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to uphold the ethical principles of research.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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