



‘Born Free’ Dreams: South African Township Youth Discuss Their Hopes for a Better Life in Future

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Abstract

The advent of democracy in 1994 promised South Africans a ‘better life for all’ and the so-called ‘born free’ generation hoped for better education and job opportunities than those of their parents and grandparents, who had lived under apartheid. In focus group discussions, township youth living in a small university town in the country’s poorest Eastern Cape Province had the opportunity to express what hopes they had for their future in the post-Covid-19 era and confirmed the important role of hope in their lives as a useful tool that motivated them to aspire to fulfil their dreams. In response to select items from the Snyder hope scales, youth discussed their life goals, optimism, agency, and pathway thinking to realise their dreams. Youth recognised hope could be both harmful as well as useful. The discussions provided an opportunity for youth to share and compare with others their experiences of disappointment and failure, of times when they had felt hopeless, with the worst cases of hopelessness resulting in alcohol and substance abuse, which was reportedly widespread among township youth. Family, neighbours and significant others provided support and advice that assisted youth to recover from hopelessness, and to find new direction in life. Results from this qualitative study point to the importance of providing township youth with a platform to share their experiences of hopelessness. Policy and practical interventions are needed to support and guide hopeless youth to regain their mental health, well-being, and hope for the future.

Keywords Hope and optimism · Snyder hope scales · Narrative quality-of-life studies - focus group discussions · South African township youth · Post-Covid-19 mental health

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Introduction

Hope is thought to be the prerogative of youth, who have their lives ahead of them. With the advent of democracy, the newly elected government promised South Africans a ‘better life for all’.¹ Hope for that better life was tangible following the first open elections that ushered in South Africa’s democratic era. South African youth born after 1994 – the so-called ‘born frees’ – expected to enjoy greater freedoms and opportunities in life than their parents and grandparents had experienced under apartheid.

Almost thirty years later, in 2022, coming out of the Coronavirus pandemic, South Africans hoped that life would return to normal, and livelihoods and the economy would recover. This was the setting for the qualitative study of hope among township youth living in a small university town in the Eastern Cape in late 2022.

The study reported here aimed to learn how township youth see their future life situation in the post-Covid-19 era. The research conducted for this study used focus group discussions with youth to explore their understanding and experience of hope as a tool and motivator to realise their dreams. This research forms part of a broader ongoing programme of work on hope, optimism and quality of life in South Africa, involving mixed-methods research that spans focus groups and cognitive interviewing through to nationally representative surveying (see Boyce & Harris, 2012).

Hope and Optimism in the Quality-of-Life Literature

People around the world will always have hoped for future prosperity for themselves and their families. Optimism, defined as the extent to which individuals expect desired outcomes to happen in future and expect undesired outcomes not to happen, is most often considered to be a character trait or disposition (Bailis & Chipperfield, 2012). Hope, strictly speaking may not be an emotion, but hope and its twin, optimism, can be considered ‘the wellspring from which many emotions arise’ (Karras, 2019). Snyder (2002, p. 249), in his article on the origins of his cognitive hope theory, writes that hope, as he was coming to define it, was ‘primarily a way of thinking, with feelings playing an important, albeit contributory role’.

The modern theory of hope was developed by Western psychologists and health scientists, who observed that hopeful people responded better to medical treatment, and that hope nurtured resilience. According to Charles Richard, ‘Rick’ Snyder’s well-known hope theory, hope involves beliefs about self and one’s own actions that are related to the attainment of desired outcomes. Hope manifests in people who believe they have the agency to pursue goals in life. The subtitle of the Snyder’s influential 2002 paper, ‘Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind’, will resonate with many South Africans, who held high hopes in 1994 for ‘a better life for all’ in the ‘rainbow nation’ under democracy.

¹ The African National Congress (ANC) used the slogan ‘A better life for all’ in the country’s first democratic elections in 1994. At the time, a youth-themed poster even stated ‘ANC stands for all youth! A better life for all!’. This theme has been used prominently and routinely by the party since, including in its 2021 local government elections manifesto.

Hope and Culture

While the notion of hope and its sister, optimism for the future, will be universal, words to express hope and optimism may be context-specific and culturally grounded. Quality-of-life scholars acknowledge that there may be different cultural understandings and rhetoric of hope (Averill & Sundararajan, 2005), and that people in different cultures may use different cognitive mechanisms to attain and maintain positive future expectations. The Hope-Barometer International Research Program represents an ambitious undertaking to explore such different cultural understandings of hope (Krafft et al., 2018; Krafft, 2022a, b).

Hope and Well-Being

Hope is a relatively new field of interest for quality-of-life studies. Pleeging, Burger and van Exel (2022) have compiled a systematic and comprehensive literature review of the relationship between hope and subjective well-being, and the different conceptualizations of hope across disciplines, and empirical measures of hope. They draw a distinction between three different types of hope: cognitive, emotional, and future expectations. The three approaches use different instruments in empirical quality-of-life studies. *Cognitive* hope is most often measured using Snyder's hope scales; *emotional* hope uses instruments that capture feelings of hopefulness and hopelessness, while the Cantril ladder is among the instruments that inquire into *positive expectations*.

Pleeging and her colleagues (2022) reviewed 48 publications in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2014) that examined hope and subjective well-being and established that both cognitive and emotional hope were related to overall subjective well-being. Snyder's *cognitive hope* measure of agency was found to have a stronger association with life satisfaction than with pathways to achieve goals. *Emotional hope*, measured by hopefulness scales, worked as a psychological force or 'buffer' to provide resilience, and help people to deal with stressful or difficult situations. Indicators of *positive expectations* seemed to be more weakly related to happiness than other forms of hope. Compared to expectations for the future, hope was less likely to result in disappointment and disillusionment as it was inherently uncertain and required personal effort.

Hope and Policy

Given the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic posed to well-being worldwide, happiness researchers recommend that policy making should focus on boosting hope for the future, particularly for the youth (see Graham, 2023).

Youth and Hope

Our case study builds on earlier research on hope and optimism conducted among youth in Africa. Although people in Africa 'are still waiting for happiness' and score

lower than other countries on the Cantril ladder², their outlook on the future is far more positive (Gulyas, 2015; Møller et al., 2017). In particular, youthful optimism is above the national average across sub-Saharan Africa (Møller & Roberts, 2021).

In South Africa, citizens became more optimistic with the coming of democracy (Harris, 1997; Dickow & Møller, 2002), and the first decade under democracy was named the ‘Age of Hope’ by Roberts, wa Kivulu and Davids (2010). The South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), which replicated Hadley Cantril’s classic 1960s study of hopes and fears in 2012, found that all South Africans rated their present life circumstances better than their past ones, but black South Africans were exceptionally optimistic about life in future (Møller & Roberts, 2017). Noteworthy is that the South African study used Cantril’s original line of questioning for his ladder of life scale that asked survey respondents to describe hopes and fears in their own words. The SASAS Cantril replication was refielded as part of the 19th annual SASAS round in late 2022, together with the same subset of the Snyder hope and optimism scale measures used in the youth focus groups case study reported in this paper.

Qualitative Youth Studies

Qualitative studies conducted among black South African youth have captured future expectations and optimism, both before and after the coming of democracy in the country, using a letter-writing competition (Møller, Richards & Mthembu, 1991; Leggett et al., 1997) and focused discussions (Richards et al., 2023). Eloff’s (2019) contribution on the ‘kaleidoscope of hope’ in African societies documents the complexities of everyday life and hope for the future as well as the simultaneous fragility and tenacity of individuals who try to find hope for the future against all odds. In particular, she found access to education and employment were major challenges for young people across the continent.

Background to the Study

Our case study of hope aimed to explore how ‘born-free’ township youth felt about their lives close on three decades into the ‘new’ South Africa, and their hopes for the future. We asked our youth to describe their hopes and goal-seeking behaviour in response to Snyder’s cognitive, goal-seeking approach to measuring hope, based on his well-known Hope Theory. Our focus group discussions with township youth cover all three types of hope identified in the hope and quality-of-life literature: cognitive, emotional, and positive expectations.

² The Cantril ladder (Cantril, 1965), also known as the Cantril self-anchoring striving scale (Glatzer & Gulyas, 2014) is used to measure future expectations. The World Happiness Report’s (Helliwell et al., 2023) Cantril measure asks survey respondents to imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom of the ladder to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life, the bottom of the ladder the worst possible life for respondents. Respondents are asked on which step of the ladder they personally feel they stand at this time.

The research was conducted with township youth living in Makhanda, a small university town located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.³ Makhanda, formerly Grahamstown, is known as an educational centre and the home of the country's pre-eminent annual national arts and culture festival. One of the country's major universities, and a number of private as well as public schools are located in the historic city centre, which is within walking distance of the nearest township neighbourhoods in Makhanda East. Rhodes University's community engagement is actively involved in educational programmes in Makhanda East. GADRA Education, a local initiative that partners with the university, addresses issues of unequal education in South Africa, assisting youth to improve their matriculation results, and aiming to improve education and, ultimately, employment opportunities for youth.

Research Design

Focus Group Discussions

Four focus groups were convened for the qualitative study. Each group was composed of members from the same or adjacent township neighbourhoods that differed according to the date of establishment and type of housing⁴. A total of 22 youth were invited to participate in four focus group discussions. Each group included between five or six young men and women between the ages of 19 and 36 years⁵, with an average age of 28 years. The largest share of youth in each of the focus groups described themselves as unemployed. In total, 15 participants in the study were unemployed, four were employed or self-employed, and three were still attending high school or studying. Sixteen participants had received some secondary school education, while six were pursuing some form of higher education at university or a nursing college at the time of the study.

The composition of the groups was as follows:

Group 1: Youth from Extensions 4 and 5, adjacent neighbourhoods in one of the more established and centrally located housing areas in Makhanda East. Three men and three women. One was aged between 19 and 24 years, four were between 25 and 29 years, and one was 35 years.

Group 2: Youth from Extensions 6 and 8, areas provided with Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses since 1994. Four men and two women; four were aged between 19 and 24 years, and two were between 25 and 29 years.

³ The Eastern Cape province, one poorest of South Africa's nine provinces, has a high rate of unemployment. See Lightstone 2023, <https://businessstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/709202/south-africas-most-undesirable-province/>.

⁴ Quality-of-life studies in Makhanda (then Grahamstown) have documented township household living conditions (Møller et al., 2001; Møller, 2008) and youth development (Møller, 2003).

⁵ An older outlier included in the average age was the 45-year-old male discussant in Group 4.

Group 3: Youth participants from a new informal housing area developed by residents, called ‘Enkanini’ (‘stubbornness’ in isiXhosa) to reflect their determination not to move from their new homes. Three men and two women. One participant each was aged between 19–24 years, 25–29 years, and 30–34 years, while two participants were aged between 35–39 years.

Group 4: Youth from Extension 9, a RDP housing area. Three men and two women. Two were aged between 19 and 24 years, two were between 30 and 34 years, and one was 45 years old.

Taken together, the age distribution across the four groups was: 19–24 years: 8, 25–29 years: 7, 30–34 years: 3, 35–39 years: 3, 45 years: 1.

Our case study includes South Africa’s older ‘Born-Free Millennials’ (born 1980–95, aged 28–43 years), as well as the younger ‘Born Free Gen-Z’ youth (born 1996 and after, aged 19–27 years).

An additional fifth focus group discussion was conducted with older township residents, mainly to compare their views on hope across generations. For the sake of brevity, only select results from the discussion are reported here.⁶

Venues for the focus group discussions were private township homes for Groups 1, 3 and 4, and at a neighbourhood sports centre for Group 2. Discussions were held in isiXhosa, the local language spoken in the Eastern Cape, the second largest African language group in South Africa. Participants were ensured of confidentiality and encouraged to speak freely about their views. Discussions were recorded with participants’ permission and later transcribed and translated into English. Participants agreed to identify themselves as speakers for the recording.

Topics of Discussion

The focus group discussants were first asked to consider the role hope played in their lives, and to describe their personal experience of hopes fulfilled and of hopelessness, before discussing select items from the Snyder hope scales on hope as disposition and agency. Lastly, discussants were asked to compare hopefulness across generations and township neighbourhoods.

Research Findings: Discussion of the Hope Concept

Understanding of Hope

All discussion groups confirmed that the isiXhosa word for hope refers to *themba*. *Themba* serves as a given name for both girls and boys. There are a number of South African charity organisations and hospitals, including the public TB hospital in Makhanda East, called Themba.

⁶ Composition of the older Group 5: Six adults from Extension 6. Four men and two women. Two were aged 37–38 years, one 42 years, two 45–49 years, and one 56 years. The discussion was held at a venue in Extension 6.

The discussion groups were first asked to consider the benefits of being hopeful and whether being too hopeful might cause harm.

'Is it a good thing to be hopeful? Can one be too hopeful? Do you think wishing for good things to happen to you will help you – or might be dangerous and harm you?'

Positive Hope

There was general consensus that hope was 'a good thing' and important. One discussant referred to the importance of hope during the Coronavirus pandemic:

'Well, to have hope is a good thing, because when Covid-19 started to kill people, we had hope that it will pass. Indeed, although it is still living among us, it is no longer that harmful and dangerous, but slowly phasing out as we hoped.' (2–1, Focus group 2, discussant 1)

Discussants used a range of descriptors when defining hope. Noteworthy is that in this initial discussion of hope, discussants in all four groups spontaneously introduced or paraphrased definitions of hope and key concepts that feature in the scholarly literature on hope, such as the importance of goals in life (also referred to as 'wishes' by discussants), and 'agency' and 'pathways' to attain goals in life.

Hope was also described as 'open-ended', in the sense that being hopeful would not necessarily bring success, as defined in the scholarly hope literature.

'Hope means it may or may not happen. In music there are notes that are high, and also those that are low. If you tell yourself that you won't reach the high note you may end up not reaching it, because your mind has that limitation. That's how I understand it.' (1–4)

Hope as a Human Trait

Some discussants described hope as essential for human well-being or as an intrinsically human trait.

'Life has its ups and downs, so you need hope.' (2–6).

'Hope lives in us. Without hope, it is the same thing as not living. Every day is made up of small hopes: we sleep, and hope to wake up. Hope is something we need to have always.' (2–1).

'Without hope there is no future. You are "lifeless". Even if it does not happen, hope will give you courage that one day it will come true. You can't control everything in life because nature controls it. Having hope will pull you through.' (4–3).

Hope is Helpful

Being hopeful was thought to motivate people to do their best to achieve their goals in life. Discussants often referred to the ‘push’, or ‘drive’, required to succeed in life – referred to as ‘agency’ according to the literature on hope.

‘We expect things to be different because of hope.’ (4–2).

‘You become motivated in what you are doing.’ (1–1).

‘Without hope, you have nothing to push for till you get it.’ (2–5).

‘Hope encourages you to aim for a particular thing, to set up goals and time frames, so that you achieve what you wish for.’ (1–3).

Agency and Pathways to Make Hopes Come True

Discussants were adamant about the need for agency to realise hopes in life. Hope was no guarantee that dreams would come true:

‘You need to make an effort. You can’t have expectations for what you have not worked for.’ (2–4).

‘It’s not good to rely on it [hope]. You need to do something. For example, to keep busy while applying for a job.’ (2–2).

‘If you hoped to pass your studies, you also needed to study.’ (2–6).

‘Hope needs support, such as prayer.’ (3–5).

‘You must act on hope. God also expects you to help yourself by acting on it.’ (3–1).

Negative Hope

Hope was not uniformly described by focus group participants in positive terms. They also responded to the first question with varied references to dashed, deferred and loss of hope.

Dashed Hopes - Disappointments in Life

‘Hope brings happiness, but also disappoints’ (4–5), was how one group summed up the role of hope in their lives. While almost all discussants agreed that hope was a good thing to have, and helpful for them, discussants also agreed that hope could be accompanied by disappointments, which could be harmful.

Even everyday life might present disappointments. A high-school youth spoke of the possibility of hopes being dashed in a routine school day: ‘I always hope to learn something at school, and to have something to eat when I come home from school – but sometimes you can be disappointed.’ (2–3)

Deferred Hopes

Discussants also pointed to the importance of resetting goals in life when hopes were not fulfilled:

'It is good to be hopeful but not to wait endlessly.' (3-1)

'It is bad to cage yourself in that hope. ... You must fight for your wishes. You need to trust yourself to take steps to get what you wished for. You need to opt for alternatives, if waiting too long.' (3-1)

Loss of hope – The Dark Side of Hope

The discussions turned to dangers of being too hopeful and to the loss of hope. Discussants gave examples of how disappointment in life might lead a hopeful person to suffer harm or do harm to others. Dashed hopes could lead to acts of desperation.

'Hope is not always good.' (4-1)

'Hope is two-sided. It helps you and endangers you. It kills you emotionally when things do not turn out as expected.' (3-2)

One group discussed why hope might be more harmful for people with less faith. They argued that non-believers were less likely to move on in life if disappointed, whereas hope continued to be there for 'praying persons' who believe in God.

Other discussants considered that some people who had lost hope might place the blame on others for their lack of success and do them harm. Yet other people might turn to liquor and drugs, and keep bad company, or even contemplate suicide.

Asked what made people lose hope, one discussant responded with a single word: 'Failure... that's where you find yourself with pills or a rope in front of yourself, as there's no more hope.'⁷ (3-4)

Summary

The groups concluded their introductory discussion on hope by summing up their views as follows: 'Hope is helpful', and 'Hope brings happiness, but also disappoints'.

Setting Goals in Life

Discussants were asked the following questions about the specific goals they hoped to achieve in their lives. *'Have you set goals for yourself that you wanted to achieve*

⁷ Noteworthy is that a member of the older discussion group also referred to the danger of suicide resulting from fears of dashed hopes: 'If you can't encourage yourself, you won't be able to face things in life. That's why people commit suicide because they told themselves they can't succeed. Thinking that one day you'll succeed keeps you in hope.' (5-6)

in life? Possibly to make your life better or to make you more respected in the community?’

Education and Employment as a Passport to Success in Life

Our focus group discussants represented South Africa’s so-called ‘born frees’, both the Millennials and the Gen-Zs, for whom the country’s democratic constitution guarantees freedoms unheard of by earlier generations of black South Africans. These cohorts of young people were the first to be able to dream of gaining an education and entering the world of work in the new South Africa.

Typical goals for our focus youth discussants included completing their education and securing steady employment. Starting a small formal or informal business or enterprise were options for both school leavers as well as dropouts.

Motivations to Achieve Life Goals

Discussants set goals to improve their life chances by returning to school to improve their matriculation symbols to stand a better chance of gaining educational qualifications that would allow them to follow a chosen career path. A few youth set as their goal to be the first in their family to attain a higher education and to serve as role models for their siblings. For example, a young woman in Group 4 explained that she could not afford to disappoint her mother, who had been ‘Blessed with permanent employment and tried her best to put us in private schools.’ In turn, she felt obliged to succeed. ‘It’s like you are not allowed to drop out of school in my family, till you get to tertiary and get employed and can stand on your own.’ (4–1)

A young woman, who had decided to take a gap year before returning to complete her nursing degree, said she hoped to broaden her knowledge of the community she would serve in future by joining a local civic organisation. (2–2)

A youth who originally had wanted to become a boxer, decided to reset his goals and take up rugby instead. He reckoned there were more opportunities for a professional rugby player to become a member of the national team. (2–3)

Noteworthy is that most discussants who still wished to complete their education had not given up their hopes in life: discussants in their mid-twenties from Group 1 reported that they ‘still wished to finish’ (1–6), had ‘not yet reached my destination but were ‘still on the road.’ (1–3)

Personal Experience of Hope and Loss of Hope

Once the discussants had shared their understanding of the hope concept, the conversation turned to their own lived experience of hope in the past:

‘Have you ever wished for something good to happen to you? What has been your experience of hoping for something to happen in your own or your family’s life that would make life better?’

Although the question put to discussants asked about positive experiences of hopes for the future, the majority of discussants chose to report mainly their negative experiences: younger discussants described how they were still pursuing their goals in life or had been 'distracted' from fulfilling their hopes for a variety of reasons, ranging from pregnancy, injury, lack of finance, poor relational support, to falling in with bad company, and becoming victims of alcohol or drug abuse. More mature youth told tales of how they had experienced setbacks and failures in their life careers, often with serious consequences.

Most of these stories ended with discussants' evaluation of the outcome of their dashed hopes and setbacks in life. Overwhelmingly, they noted they still hoped to achieve their goals in life. Some had achieved gratification much later than expected after recovering from failures or setbacks. Others reported they had reassessed their situation and moved on in life. A few said they had turned over a new leaf after doing themselves harm. However, a small minority of discussants still harboured disappointments in life.

Examples of Hopes Fulfilled

Members of Group 4 spent more time than the other groups detailing how some of their hopes had been fulfilled across a range of life domains including education, livelihoods, housing, and transport.

For example, a 'dream came true' for a young woman, orphaned early in life, when she was able to enrol in the local university. (4-1). A young mother reported she had finally managed to find employment after 'facing many challenges during Covid'. She had struggled to put food on the table during Covid-19 after her family had had to close its liquor business⁸ and she had become pregnant and needed to support her new-born. (4-2) A young father reported he had finally managed to find a home of his own to live with his family. (4-3) A Group 4 shift worker said his hope had been fulfilled when he became the proud owner of a new car. He now could drive to his workplace out of town safely, even in rainy weather conditions. (4-4)

Examples of Dashed and Deferred Hopes

The group discussions covered a wide range of different experiences of dashed and deferred hopes.

'Distractions'

Young women often talked about 'distractions', referring to pregnancies that meant they had either postponed earning their matric or had left school early. A woman in her mid-twenties, who failed to complete her schooling when she became pregnant, said she felt she had also failed her mother, who had raised her. Her life had taken 'a

⁸ South Africa's strict lockdown to save lives during the Covid-19 pandemic prohibited the sale of liquor and restricted consumption of alcohol in taverns and restaurants, which caused loss of livelihoods across many economic sectors.

wrong turn' when she turned to drink. Nonetheless, she hoped to show her mother her appreciation by one day owning a business. (1–6)

A youth in his thirties recalled how he lost hope of gaining access to university, when he 'got tempted with liquor' by his school friends one Saturday. On their way home from drinking with his friends, he had managed to disarm an attacker of his firearm. When the police arrived, the discussant was sent to prison for possessing a weapon instead of writing his final exams. 'I'd already applied at the university with the hope of getting admitted, but those dreams died that day.' (4–5)

Injury, illness, lack of finance, age restrictions, and crime had prevented other discussants from pursuing their dreams of a successful career.

Injuries

The young man who took up boxing to deal with violence in his neighbourhood said he had suffered an injury that prevented him from participating in his club's first challenge. His fear of injury put paid to his dream of becoming a boxer. (2–3)

A 29-year-old youth who had wished to pursue music studies at a leading South African university, said he fell ill and had to drop out of high school. 'That hope of returning to school died long ago', he said. (2–1)

Age Restrictions

Another youth's hope to become a professional soldier was dashed when age restrictions prevented him from joining the army after leaving school. He had enrolled in a cadet group at his high school. 'I grew up watching army movies and wished that one day I would be one of them, but got disappointed', he said. (1–4)

Lack of Finance

A 27-year-old youth said he gave up the idea of studying medicine, as it would cost too much. 'That's when I felt hopeless. It made me feel bad to the extent that I got myself mixed up in drugs.' (3–3)

A dashed hope for a young 19-year-old woman was not being able to attend her matric dance owing to lack of funds. The event represents an important milestone for South African youth. She said, 'I felt disappointed and very sad, but with time, I healed.' (2–2)

Crime and Victimization

South Africa has a high rate of crime. Clashes with the law and being a victim of crime also played a role in causing hopelessness in some cases: A businessman reported having to sell his business after experiencing several break-ins. (1–2) Other discussants described how they had lost their jobs or had resigned when they had been accused of theft. (4–4, 1–1) One young discussant said he had felt too weak to tell his side of the story when falsely accused of wrongdoing at high school. (1–4)

Another youth, who had been accused of drug dealing at her school, had managed to prove her innocence. (2–2)

Lived Experience of Hopelessness

Many discussants had already spontaneously shared their personal experiences of hopelessness at the beginning of the discussion session, when asked about their understanding of the hope concept.

Later in the session, when the conversation moved on to Snyder's item on hope 'pathways', the facilitator directly posed the following questions on the experience of being hopeless to discussants:

'Have you ever been in a situation when you felt hopeless? What made you feel hopeless?'

Causes of Hopelessness

When discussing hope, discussants, particularly the older youth, often spoke of setbacks in life and experiencing a state of hopelessness. There were many situations that led to feeling hopeless.

A major cause of hopelessness for youth was the death of loved ones who were often influential persons in young people's lives, such as role models or family breadwinners on whom the discussants were financially dependent. The impact of loss of loved ones is discussed later in greater detail.

Dashed hopes had occurred when youth failed examinations, including entrance examinations that would enable them to pursue higher education. Hopelessness set in after experiencing loss of one's job, income, home, or business. One discussant felt utterly hopeless after being bullied by friends who were a 'bad' influence. (2–3) In some cases, discussants had been overwhelmed by multiple setbacks in life during the strict Coronavirus lockdown period in South Africa.

While time had assisted some discussants to heal after setbacks and hurts to their self-confidence, other discussants reported feeling depressed or hopeless for longer periods. In one case, hopelessness as a teenager had determined the career path for an older youth in Group 3, who now earned a living doing mainly odd jobs. As a teenager, he had attended one of the township high schools. He shared the story of how he had felt utterly hopeless when he experienced first-hand South Africa's unequal education situation. In one of his last years at school, he had been instructed to sit a scholarship examination the following day, without any preparation, alongside pupils from Makhanda's private schools who had been well prepared. He remembered the shame he felt when sitting 'a meaningless examination that only offered opportunities to those from the white community to gain scholarships.' The experience so discouraged him that he lost interest in school. (3–3)

Severe Cases of Hopelessness

In the worst cases of hopelessness, discussants described how they had drowned their sorrows and helplessness by resorting to drink or substance abuse. A few discussants had even considered suicide. When asked how they would react if things went wrong for them, an older member from Group 3 implied that losing hope would be akin to committing suicide, and hopeless individuals needed to exercise agency:

‘Losing hope is the same thing as failing yourself. I can’t do that because I am the one to make things happen, so I would be committing suicide.’ (3–1)

Failure Leading to Hopelessness

Three discussants shared experiences of failure that had led to feelings of hopelessness. However, they had managed to remain hopeful or regain hope in time.

A former company manager from Group 1 reported that he had been so overwhelmed by his early success that it ruined his life. He had got used to earning such a good salary that he started to spend recklessly. He recommended others who faced failure as he had, to ‘embrace your support structures’. His mother, who had been his support in life, had died recently. He said he knew it was now up to him, whether he ‘could make it or not’ in life. (1–1)

Another discussant from Group 3 said he had hoped to establish his own business after working for a construction company for over ten years. Failure to secure start-up funds to set up his own company according to plan had left him ‘with internal bruises that were difficult to heal’. Nonetheless, in time he had looked for alternatives and had not lost hope in the future. (3–1)

A prospective businessman from Group 3 said he had left school early to become his own boss. However, he had chosen to work with an untrustworthy partner, who had cheated him out of the company he had established. Although he had learnt his lesson that trusting a person can be dangerous, he still had not lost hope. (3–2)

The youth from Group 2 whose dream of pursuing music studies had failed, said he had initially been sad, but later had made peace with what had happened and still had hope for the future. (2–1)

Loss of Hope Following Death and Loss of Significant Others

As mentioned earlier, loss of hope often occurred when discussants experienced the death of loved ones and loss of important role models. Several discussants talked of their experiences:

A discussant, who had two older family members die during the Covid-19 pandemic, remembered the deceased as his ‘great supports in life’, ‘pillars of strength’, and confidants. (2–1)

A 25-year-old youth said he had lost hope after his older brother died of Covid. The brother had presided over traditional family gatherings and restored peace and

unity among family members whenever he visited. 'It will never be the same again; like his work died with him.' (2–6)

A religious discussant stated she had hoped to follow in the footsteps of elders in her church, for whom she had great respect. However, when she observed how her church was divided into different factions, she stopped going to church. (2–5)

Regaining Hope Following Setbacks in Life

Remember that hope is a powerful weapon, even when all else is lost.

- Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first democratically elected president.

To choose hope is to step firmly forward... Hope sends us into the arms of others.

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa's first black Anglican Archbishop.

Discussions also focussed on the pathways to regaining hope. Several discussants reported how they had weathered temporary setbacks and disappointments in life and still managed to achieve their goals in life. For example, a young mother from Group 1 who had wished to get 'a good Grade 12 pass' to go to university, had instead failed Grade 11 twice and fallen pregnant. She described how she had later 'pushed hard' to complete Grade 12, and noted her family was proud of her achievements. 'Eventually you will get there,' she said. (1–5)

'Life Must go on' – Advice on how to Regain Hope

Several discussants said they had learnt lessons from their disappointments that would stand them and their fellow discussants in good stead in future.

A youth in his mid-thirties from Group 3 admitted he had lost out on his own education when 'everything nowadays depends on education'. He had not chosen his friends wisely in his younger years. He noted that, 'It happens to many of us that we lose focus and follow others, even if they do bad things.' (3–5)

The businessman who had ruined his life through reckless spending, advised others to shoulder the blame for their own failure. (1–1) The youth who had chosen the wrong business partner said he had not lost hope. However, he had learnt his lesson to be careful to trust the right people. (3–2)

The youth who had missed out on his own education advised young people to seek support from 'people who might see your potential' to find business opportunities. (3–5)

Social Support to Regain Hope

Access to social support often assisted discussants who had experienced loss of loved ones and disappointments in life to regain hope for the future and self-confidence to achieve their goals in life. The importance of regaining hope by 'embracing your support structures' was a common theme of discussion for all groups.

Youth who had turned to substance abuse when hopeless had been rescued from despair by a close family member and trusted person, or by a neighbour acting as parent. In turn, youth often felt an obligation to their support persons to actively fulfil their potential in life.

Discussants often expressed their wish to complete their education and gain employment, not only for their own sake, but also to repay the hopes invested in them by their elders. As noted earlier, by attaining their goals in life, the younger generation hoped to show their appreciation of the financial and moral support they had received from their parents and other respected persons. Discussants, whose significant others had died before they managed to realise their hopes in life, were sad that they could not make their elders proud of their achievements. Some wished to honour their deceased support persons by shouldering the responsibility to succeed in life on their own. 'She is no longer there, so it's up to me, whether I make it or not.' (1–1)

Research Results: Discussion of the Snyder Hope Scales

After discussing their understanding and experience of hope, discussants were presented with select items from the Snyder's hope scale. The Snyder hope items, which are presented as statements describing hope as disposition or state, were paraphrased as questions in more conversational terms for the focus group discussions. When administered in a survey-research setting, respondents are asked to use a rating scale to indicate how each statement applies to them.

Positive Hope Disposition

Snyder Hope Trait Item 1: Positive Disposition

In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.

Discussants were asked: *'Do you usually expect the best in your life, now that we are living in uncertain times?'* In response to Snyder's first hope as disposition item, most discussants believed 'the best is still to happen'. They picked up on the theme of uncertain times, by reflecting that they had lived through the Coronavirus pandemic.

'Yes, like Covid-19. We did not believe it would pass. Look where we are now! Things will get better than they were in 2019.' (2–1)

Other discussants repeated the goals they had identified earlier that they hoped to attain, such as getting a part-time job while completing their studies. (3–5) Several groups thought their generation could expect a better future than their elders.⁹

⁹ A member of the older group expressed the same hope, that had disappointed her so far: 'My wish was that my children will be employed and the hardship I had gone through will not repeat itself with them.' She said that her children were still unemployed, and 'still dependent on us, contrary to what I thought by now would be happening.' (5–6)

Preparation for the future was all important. 'It depends on how you prepare for tomorrow today,' declared a member of Group 1. (1–2) A fellow discussant in the group said he had designed an **RSVP** invitation for a better future: The **R** should stand for **R**esearch into what I want, **S** for **S**tudying it carefully, then to **V**isualise it, and **P**ractise living that future before it even exists! (1–1)

He also told the story of a dream in which a person had been pushed under water. That person was told that the only way he could free himself and rise to the surface, was to keep kicking. The lesson to be learnt from this story, he said, was that 'We must keep kicking, *khaba, khaba*'.¹⁰(1–1) The group responded that they intended to do lots of '*khaba, khaba*' and would **RSVP** for a better future.

The '*khaba*' idea was picked up by a member of Group 3, who said he believed in a better future as 'I'm still alive and *kicking*'. (3–1) His fellow discussant agreed, saying she was determined to improve her life chances: 'I won't grow up in this zinc house.'¹¹ A lot is still going to happen.' (3–5)

Group 4 discussed the need for government to change their education strategy to assist youth to pursue practical career paths that did not require tertiary education. Such a strategy would bring hope to many more youth to find employment. The country's public school system did not offer a sufficient choice of subjects to match learners' strengths and career options. This caused 'learners to fail and they end up resorting to drug abuse and alcohol. For example, if there were more platforms to showcase and nurture talent in arts and culture, like singing or dancing', youth might avoid getting involved in drugs. (4–4)

Snyder Hope Trait Item 2: Positive Disposition

Are you a person who is always optimistic about your future?

Discussants were asked: '*Do you think you are a person who is always optimistic about your future? Or perhaps you are never optimistic about your future? Why do you say so?*'

Approximately half of the discussants indicated they were always optimistic, while the other half admitted they were both, that is, they lost hope from time to time.

Optimists said they always thought that 'things would go their way.' (3–4)

'I am this person who is always positive ... I always look at the bright side of things and expect that things will come right.' (1–2)

'I can't afford to be negative ... that would make me lose focus on getting what I want.' (2–5)

¹⁰ '*Khaba*' is an isiXhosa term meaning 'to kick'.

¹¹ Referring to the houses built with corrugated iron sheets by residents in the newly established informal settlement in Makhanda East.

Other optimists stated they were prepared to remain hopeful and positive until they reached their goals. Or, along the lines of Snyder's theory of hope, they found 'pathways' to circumvent obstacles to realise their ambitions in life.

'Even if you don't get what you want today, sometime later you'll get it.' (3-2)
 'I will succeed and become whatever I want; even if there are obstacles, I would find other ways of achieving what I want, in order to do better in life.' (4-2)
 'Even if I have fallen down, I make sure I will stand up and move on with life.'
 (4-4)

While some optimists thought self-confidence was important ('I tell myself to be strong and have faith in everything I do.' (4-3)), others thought it best to rely on and put trust in God 'to avoid disappointment in life.'¹² (3-1)

Approximately half of the discussants admitted they lost hope from time to time, particularly when their job searches were not fruitful.

'You can't always be positive at all times, ... not everything will always happen as you wish or have planned.' (1-4)
 'I can be positive and on the other side negative... You must have room for disappointment, so that you can have a plan B.' (1-3)

Support for Optimism in the Future

Both the optimists and those who lost hope from time to time spoke of how they relied on support persons. When facing disappointment, they needed support to get back on track. Optimists valued support persons who provided encouragement or feedback on how well they were doing.

'People around you will always give you hope when all is lost, be it family, friends or neighbours.' (1-5)
 'I can become negative when that hope has disappointed me, ... positive when I get support from others. There are people who are straight talkers and let you know when you are right or wrong. Mistakes are a learning [experience].' (2-6)

A smoker, who hoped to quit smoking, joked that he tells his friends that he was not born smoking and would quit in good time. (4-5) The discussant who hoped to become professional rugby player said he always received feedback after each match, so he could learn from his mistakes and improve his performance. (2-3)

¹² A member of the comparison older adult group trusted in his traditional African beliefs in the ancestors to keep him 'safe and alive, which means that I still have a purpose to live for.' (5-4) Many Christians among both older and younger Xhosa-speaking people in the Eastern Cape also acknowledge the ancestors.

Negative Hope Disposition

Snyder hope Trait Items 3 and 4: Negative Disposition

I hardly ever expect things to go my way.
If something can go wrong for me, it will.

Discussants were asked if Snyder's negative hope disposition applied to them: '*Do you hardly ever expect things will go your way?*'

The majority of discussants indicated they generally expected that things would go their way in life. One discussant declared he only expected good things to happen to him, as he himself does not do bad things. (2–5) Discussants across all groups said that failure was not the end of the world and things might work out for them in future. At least they had tried to succeed. It was important to stay positive: 'You must always expect the unexpected, stay positive, that's me!' (1–2)

Several discussants shared their recipes for avoiding loss of hope. For example, in case of failure, they would 'make other plans' (4–1), or 'try to do things the other way round' (3–3), in order to hold onto hope. Hope was a motivator to make good things happen: 'Hope is the only thing that keeps me pushing.' (4–5)

The discussant who believed that losing hope would be akin to committing suicide, said he told himself that, 'Even if something does not happen for me, it will happen to my family or my kids and make a difference in life even after I am gone.' (3–1)

State Hope: Agency Thinking

Snyder hope Scale item 1: Agency

At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my goals.

The question put to discussants was: '*Do you have goals in life you are energetically pursuing?*' In response to this item on hope agency, discussants outlined the importance of youthful motivation and drive to meet goals in life.

Members of Group 1 discussed how they went about making sure their goals in life were realised. A young woman said she had taken 'baby steps' trying her best. As a single mother she needed to provide for her children while also saving enough money to continue her studies to find employment in her chosen field of study. (1–5) Fellow discussants in her group described how they exercised agency to succeed in life. One discussant recalled a saying she had heard: 'Come rain or shine, never stop until you've reached your goals.' (1–6) Another discussant, who talked about the importance of task management and sticking to time frames, echoed this sentiment: 'Never give up!' (1–1) A young student said she had followed her English teacher's advice on how to study hard by avoiding the many distractions that tempted youth: 'Prioritise your goals and forgo your pleasures until you get what you want!' In her case, energetically following her teacher's 'wisdom' had paid off. (1–3)

A youth in his mid-thirties in Group 2, described his fighting spirit to improve his family's standard of living: 'I always tell myself that waking up at 3 a.m. in the morning to prepare to leave for my piece job can't be a waste of time; I know what I want in life. The little I've earned by giving up my sleep must be visible in my house. This is my way of fighting for my goal.' (2–5)

Members of Group 4, who seemed to be particularly successful in achieving their goals, stressed the importance of determination 'to change your situation, so you may live a better life.' (4–2) They compared their drive to succeed with the one needed by a successful sniper: 'When you are a sniper, you aim at the target that you may knock it down, so you may be rewarded.' (4–5) Similarly, a fellow Group 4 discussant sounded a warning, that 'If you slack, you've given up for your own life. Should you not fight for your goals in life, your life would be meaningless.' (4–4)

Snyder hope State item 2: Agency

At this time, I am meeting the goals I have set for myself.

In response to the question: '*Are you meeting the goals you have set for yourself at this time?*', the sentiment expressed was mainly negative. The majority of the discussants indicated they were not meeting their goals at present.

Difficulties Meeting Goals Many discussants were frank when naming the many problems that they had experienced in trying to meet their goals. They talked about their own shortcomings, such as procrastination and postponing their efforts to continue their studies or trying to find employment. Some students had decided to take gap years, 'for the moment'. Other discussants said they were 'still trying' to meet their goals. They described the many obstacles they faced in a small town that had no factories or industry that employed young people. One discussant voiced a common complaint that youth needed bribes or contacts to get a job: 'if you don't have someone from the inside, or money, you will not get the job.' (1–4) Others referred to the need for funding or financial backing to pursue their goals, or to time constraints. An older student highlighted the limited local funding opportunities in her field compared to overseas. (2–4) The high school pupil with ambitions to play professional rugby said he had difficulties pursuing his own goals, as he was also expected to attend to his domestic duties or emergencies at home. (2–3)

There were also complaints about precarious work: The former businessman in his mid-thirties from Group 3 said he only had work four days a month at this time. (3–2) Another youth in his mid-twenties from Group 2, said he was in the habit of frequenting township taverns to learn the latest news and gossip about job opportunities. The jobs he got through this channel were 'mostly contracts and they don't last long.' (2–6)

Goal Achievers A minority of discussants felt they had successfully achieved their goals. For example, a young woman in Group 2, who loved sports, said she was often

called to judge boxing matches. She had also taken the incentive to initiate netball to keep young township women busy and out of trouble: 'We could see a lot of girls are idle and always standing by the corner shop. The experience of girls being raped, pushed us to do something that would keep them busy in one place where they'll be safe.' (2–2) A young woman from Group 4 said she had managed to write her final matriculation examinations even though she had got ill and was taken to hospital at that time. (4–1)

State Hope: Pathway Thinking

Snyder hope State Items 3 and 4: Pathways

There are lots of ways around any problem that I am facing now.
I can think of many ways to reach my current goals.

Discussants were asked about their pathway thinking as follows: '*If you face problems in life, are you able to find ways to get around these problems?*'¹³ '*Are you a person who can always think of different ways to reach the goals you have set for yourself right now?*'¹⁴

The majority among discussants maintained they knew how to deal with problems they encountered in life. They claimed they were able to find pathways to reach their goals. Once again, discussants talked about the importance of seeking support from others. There were two options outlined by participants: Either you 'win by yourself, or you seek assistance or advice from others to succeed.' (4–2)

'Sometimes you are not able to judge a situation and see it needs someone else's advice and so you use that to solve [the problem].' (3–1)
'Problems are common, but by listening to other people's advice, you'd be able to face and get around them.' (4–5)

Discussants also stressed the importance of self-confidence and fortitude to find pathways to overcome obstacles:

'You must learn from your problem. What helps is not losing focus.' (3–5)

¹³ Additional probes were added to get the conversations going for Item 3 on pathway thinking: to Group 1: 'Or, do you just sit and do nothing or rather blame it on others?'; to Group 2: 'Like you are a person who is able to face your problems and find a way to tackle them, or you get stuck with them for the rest of your life, or you run away from them instead of facing them?'; to Group 3: 'Let's say you face problems in life, are you able to find ways...? Are you a person who is able to find ways of getting past that problem?'; to Group 4, '... face problems in life, as that is very common to everyone, ...'.

¹⁴ Additional probes were added to get the conversations going for Item 4 on pathway thinking to reach goals: to Group 1: 'I mean, more than one way to tackle them?'; to Group 2: 'I mean, a person who does not have only one way, one hope of achieving their goals?'

‘You are able to able to get past problems to reach goals, even with delays, by finding other ways should you get stuck.’ (4–2, 4–3, 4–4)
 ‘It is important to tell yourself you will overcome later or now ... also the support system you get, whether friend or family, is very essential in solving your problems’. (1–5)

Research Results: Comparative Youth Hopefulness

To round off the discussions once participants had responded to items in the Snyder hope scales, they were asked to assess differences in hopefulness between older and younger generations and between their own and other residential neighbourhoods.

Views on Hopefulness across Generations

Discussants were asked: ‘*Do you think younger people in your neighbourhood are more hopeful than older people living here?*’

The majority of the discussants thought younger people were less hopeful than the older generation, who, for the most part, were state-supported social pensioners, while the youth were without livelihoods. There was ‘no bright future’ for jobless township youth.

We, the Youth, ‘Are Drowning Ourselves in Liquor or Drugs’ (1–5)

All groups discussed substance abuse problems among township youth. ‘Looking at the majority of youth, they are into drugs, drinking alcohol and stealing.’ (1–4)

Members of Group 4 were the most outspoken in condemning the behaviour of township youth:

‘Perhaps if there were enough jobs this would be better. As there’s nothing to do, they resort to all the bad things that destroy their lives.’ (4–1)

‘The majority of people who are hopeful in this neighbourhood are the older people. I say that because we youth are involved in a lot of things like smoking drugs, drinking liquor, and stealing to get money so we can buy more drugs. The older people pray to God for us, that we may make it in life and quit using drugs, while we youth have committed ourselves to smoking them until we die.’ (4–5)

Discussants spoke about township youth being reckless and destroying their lives. When referring to how township youth were involved in violence, discussants referred to generational differences in access to dangerous weapons:

'Like my father used to say, we youth use knives to solve our problems, when they as older people used stick fighting¹⁵ to sort out their differences.' (4–5)

A discussant from Group 1 reported that many older people in her neighbourhood had died during the Covid-19 pandemic. The orphaned youth in her neighbourhood were left with a home but no breadwinner: 'There's no one else to support or motivate them. They resort to drugs and liquor, which pushes them to sell household belongings.' (1–5)

A discussant from Group 3, who had managed to 'kick' his drug habit with support from an older family member, declared that drugs were the main problem for youth: 'Many of us youth dropped out of school because of drug abuse, that's why I say there's no future for youth.' (3–3) A fellow Group 3 discussant agreed; the future of youth exposed to the many taverns in the neighbourhood, was doomed. (3–6)

Lack of National Role Models for Youth

A male member from Group 3 referred to the negative role models for youth in the ranks of parliamentarians, whose actions compromised youth hopes for the future. He feared that the inappropriate behaviour of political leaders could negatively affect the country's prospects for attracting foreign investment that could boost job creation. 'When you tune in to the parliament channel on television, there's nothing bright.' He berated the 'bad' behaviour of members of parliament led by a younger populist party leader: 'There's no respect but always fighting against each other in the public eye abroad ... other countries won't be interested in investing in our country.'¹⁶ (3–5)

'We, as the Youth of Today, are Lazy' (1–3)

A common view was that older people were more hopeful as they were more adept in starting small businesses if they lost their jobs, and they supported each other in business. Youth were not interested in business ideas. The Group 3 discussant, who had offered to share his business ideas with youth in his neighbourhood, received only a negative response. They said, 'I'm wasting their time, when they could have attended a traditional gathering, and are missing out on liquor and meat that is being slaughtered.' (3–1)

Members from Group 1 pointed out that the older generation had grown up under difficult conditions. 'With them, everything came at a price, so they got used to fighting' (1–1). However, their generation was brought up 'softly, so we don't have that drive.' (1–5) Unlike the older generation, the youth were lazy and wanted to take short cuts to do better in life. (1–3)

¹⁵ Stick fighting is a traditional sport played by Xhosa youth (see Mayer, 1963).

¹⁶ Earlier focus group discussants expressed similar sentiments when discussing national well-being for South Africans: 'The members of a women's focus group discussion talked of recent episodes of inappropriate behaviour and lack of discipline in the Houses of Parliament, which, in their opinion, set a bad example for ordinary citizens' (see Møller et al., 2018, p. 180).

‘Nowadays, we have things very easy, like internet, computers where you could apply [for jobs] while seated here at home.’ (1–1)

‘We’ll resort to looking for a blesser or a sugar daddy and end up being prostitutes and want all those fancy things all at once.’ (1–3)

Views on Hopefulness across Township Neighbourhoods

Discussants were asked: ‘*Do you think people in this neighbourhood are more or less hopeful than the people living in other parts of Makhanda East?*’

The discussions focused exclusively on lack of hope in their neighbourhoods. All groups agreed that hopelessness among youth in their neighbourhood was the same as in other ones. Discussions picked up on earlier themes, namely that the main causes of hopelessness among youth resulted from their involvement in substance abuse, and crime and violence. Group 1 suggested that the financial problems experienced by township youth led to hopelessness: ‘Not having enough money causes stress that pushes you to liquor and drugs.’ (1–4)

Members of Group 2 enumerated the many negative problems for youth in their neighbourhood, such as lack of jobs for youth, corruption, lack of safety and security and police protection, as well as lack of parental supervision. Given this situation, they regarded their efforts to organise pro-social spare-time activities, such as sports clubs, to prevent youth from resorting to substance abuse, as having failed.

Discussants from Group 3 agreed that hopelessness among youth was similar across neighbourhoods. ‘You are always scared that you could be mugged by the bad youth called *Amaphara*¹⁷, who rob and steal.’ (3–5) However, they believed that their neighbourhood had found a more effective way of dealing with crime: Culprits ‘get banned and chased away from this area.’ (3–2) ‘Here it is better as far as crime is concerned, but drinking and drug abuse is still a problem.’ (3–2) Similarly, members of Group 4 noted that their neighbourhood had dealt more efficiently with violence, which had resulted in better youth behaviour. ‘In other areas, youth stop you to ask for money or steal from you. Here they will approach you and ask for any kind of job.’ (4–1)

Final Comments on Hope for the Future

Before closing, each group was asked whether they had found their meeting useful. The general opinion was that the discussions had indeed been beneficial; they had served as a platform for youth to speak out about their hopes and fears: ‘It was a healthy discussion that brings more hope’ (3–2), ‘Reminds us that we had dreams’ (1–5), ‘That we had goals that we’ve forgotten.’ (1–2) Discussants learnt they were not alone in experiencing hopelessness: ‘Some of the things we spoke about here are very rare to find in our discussions (2–6), ‘We shared things we couldn’t talk about with anyone’ (3–5), ‘I know that it is not me alone who has problems.’ (4–1) Discussants heard how others had recovered from setbacks in life to restore their hopes: ‘It

¹⁷ ‘*Amaphara*’ is the plural form of a colloquial term that is commonly used to describe ‘petty thieves’.

widened my mind, hearing different views' (4–4), 'How to seek help, guidance, or advice to follow our dreams.' (3–1) Some discussants vowed to take action to restore hope among youth in their community: 'It has given me homework to gather friends ... to work on our hope for the future' (4–5), 'We are able to help each other see it better here.' (2–6)

Discussion and Conclusions

There were high hopes that the transition from apartheid to democracy would provide 'a better life for all', the catchphrase adopted by the 'new' South Africa. The 'born free' youth, who have grown up in the time of democracy, were expected to enjoy greater quality of life than their parents and grandparents.

The focussed discussions conducted with township youth in a small university town explored the role hope plays in the lives of township youth in the Eastern Cape Province and their lived experience of both hope and hopelessness. The research also tested discussants' understanding of items in the Snyder hope scales, one of the most frequently used instruments to measure hope as a disposition and state.

The youth participating in the discussions believed hope was essential for human well-being – without hope there would be no future. Life goals for the youth focused mainly on access to education and employment to secure livelihoods. Although not all youth had managed to realise their goals in life, they nonetheless remained optimistic and hopeful. When describing their determination to pursue their goals in life – to escape the poverty and deprivations experienced by their parents' generation – the discussants often spoke about the need to 'fight' for a better life. They stressed the importance of agency on the part of youth, referred to as 'drive' or 'push', to make their dreams come true. They devised recipes to promote agency to keep sight of goals and find pathways to reach their dreams.

The discussions revealed that youth were familiar with the concepts of agency and pathways in the Snyder hope scales. When presented with select items from the scales, they spontaneously explained how they set about achieving their goals and how they managed to find pathways to overcome obstacles.

Discussants focussed almost exclusively on their own agency and strategies to achieve their dreams of success in life. None of the discussants said they had accessed the temporary monthly Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant that was introduced in April 2020 to assist vulnerable South Africans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although South Africa has one of the most extensive social protection programmes, including a child support grant for mothers, there is no support for young men over 18 years of age until they are eligible for the Older Person's Grant (Møller, 2010). One group hoped the government would be more pro-active in attracting foreign investment to create employment opportunities for youth.

The Snyder hope scales are designed to measure the hope of individuals. When asked about the situation of hope in their township neighbourhoods and between generations, discussants painted a dismal picture of the lack of social cohesion in their areas and of unemployed youth, who had an appetite only for alcohol and drugs, and

who engaged in violence rather than in sports and other pro-social activities.¹⁸ This negative portrait may reflect the many frustrations and deprivations, loss of lives and livelihoods experienced by youth during South Africa's strict Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Earlier studies conducted among 'liberation before education' township youth during the apartheid era found NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) youth had successfully initiated their own youth and sports groups to provide purpose and meaning in their lives (Møller et al., 1991; 1994).

Noteworthy is that many discussants had already experienced hopelessness in their short lives. Although discussants mostly identified themselves as optimists, their stories of finding themselves in hopeless circumstances dominated the conversations. In the worst cases, hopelessness had resulted in serious depression and alcohol and substance abuse. The death of loved ones during the Coronavirus pandemic and the negative impact of the Covid-19 restrictions on education and livelihoods contributed to despair and loss of hope.

Social support, having someone to count on in times of trouble, is a key factor contributing to happiness according to the World Happiness Report, especially in times of crisis (Helliwell et al., 2023). Relational well-being is particularly important in South African society, which holds collectivist rather than individualistic values. Interconnectedness contributes to a positive outlook on the future (Abler et al., 2017; Ferrari, 2022; Wissing, 2014; Wissing et al., 2019).

Our focus group discussants reported that family, friends, neighbours, and other support persons had played a critical role in rescuing them from harm and from ruining their life chances. Support persons helped youth to regain confidence in themselves to continue with their life careers after experiencing failure or disappointments. In turn, youth felt obliged to live up to the expectations of their support persons. Having shared their own experiences of regaining hope after experiencing hopelessness, the participants in the focus group study said they felt motivated to engage youth in their neighbourhoods in activities that afforded greater hope.

Conclusions

The findings from this case study point to the need for policy and practical interventions to assist youth and their communities to better understand the causes of their hopelessness and to find pathways to regain hope in the post-Covid-19 era. In future, the introduction of a Basic Income Grant, that has been under discussion since 1994 (Pienaar et al., 2021), might offer additional support for young job seekers to achieve their ambitions in life. The Coronavirus pandemic revealed the importance of mental health to cope with stress and unforeseen setbacks in life and disappointments. Making platforms available for youth to share their experiences of hopelessness with other youth and support persons, will assist them to imagine a better life in future.

¹⁸ The youth in a small town in the Eastern Cape's Karoo region are seen in a similarly negative light, according to a youth activist, who engaged high school youth in a drama project to give them hope for the future (Ngubelanga, 2022). Other small towns in the Karoo area of the Eastern Cape also have initiated cultural programmes as alternatives to substance abuse for youth.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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