

Making sense of uncertainty: The precarious lives of young migrants from rural Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the experiences of young migrants and the role of uncertainty in their precarious lives. Drawing on data from individual interviews and a workshop with young migrants aged 16–24 years old in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, we use uncertainty as a theoretical lens, to illustrate the ways in which young migrants' experiences provide meaning for them and give them an opportunity to assess, and plan for better opportunities despite the stark outlook. Thematic analysis was used to examine the multidimensionality of socio-spatial identities in young migrants. The findings illustrate how young migrants hustle for opportunities to lead valuable lives in the face of uncertainty. The implications highlight how attending to the complex intersectional nuances of uncertainty can serve as an enabler of aspirations, alongside essential structural factors influencing migration among young people brought up in rural communities. However, in proposing this alternative view of positive uncertainty, the structural violence experienced by these young people should not be overlooked and should be addressed as per their context.

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Introduction

Migration whether local or across borders essentially means leaving a community which one knows and belongs to, to being the 'other' in a new place. This comes with a lot of health risks including that of communicable diseases such as HIV (Rai et al., 2016; Schuyler et al., 2015). Being new in an area involves navigating identities across both places: forging relations within the new place while maintaining a link with the society of origin (Njwambe et al., 2019). This process of assimilation differs from a 'melting pot' analogy often used to describe the integration of migrants' cultures to form a new society and people adopting new identities; a view challenged in favour of a multiculturalism approach where people also maintain practices from their original place of settlement (Ryburn, 2018). For young people it is not so much a 'melting pot' but a desire to blend in. Adolescents and young adults are in a vulnerable transition period and mobility may further exacerbate their vulnerability impacting on their identity (Berry, 2004; Grabska, 2020; Honwana, 2014; Jensen, 2011; Mains, 2012). For these young migrants this brings with it a lot of anxiety, given that this

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experience occurs while they are also still maturing and they may not be equipped with necessary life skills to easily adapt (Grabska, 2020). The degree to which young migrants can control their social space is largely dependent on social identities shaped by factors such as gender and socio-economic status. It is also dependent on the physical place that they move to and the local conditions of the physical environment. For young people, these coalesce and interact to shape their social identities, which as they are still under development are especially malleable and can be particularly challenging for a migrant.

In South Africa, many young people move away from home (usually rural area) to seek employment, better economic opportunities, and a better life in the bigger cities (Mlambo, 2018; Njwambe et al., 2019). The last thirty years, post the apartheid system of racial segregation in South Africa, brought geographical mobility for black South Africans who were previously restricted by the Pass Laws which required permits to reside and work in certain areas (Reed, 2013). Together with the political changes came the economic influences when a shift in the labour market from mining to other informal work forced people to move to cities. This freedom has seen a large movement towards towns and cities including to peri-urban areas and staged migration from rural areas to small towns with the intention of then moving to larger metropolises. Freedom of movement also meant more women were able to work outside the home, contributing to the changing profile of migrants as more youth, women and children moved to different places across communities and most often under unfavourable conditions (Mkwananzi, 2019).

In this exploratory study we looked at the lived realities of young people who have moved from a rural to a peri-urban setting in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, as they ‘hustle’ for a better a life (Deotti & Estruch, 2016). These young people live amid structural violence which is a concept that describes the injustices and vulnerabilities experienced by an individual due to the broader social, political, economic aspects that shape their existence and their world (Odhiambo et al., 2023). The complex processes of structural violence that can often be invisible to others may constrain the agency of the person and cause harm by restricting access to resources leading to an impoverished life. Some of these structural barriers include unemployment, racism, poor quality of life which are embodied and therefore experienced as violence against an individual. Others have defined structural violence as offensives that strip an individual of their human dignity such as poverty, exposure to violence, and social inequalities making it difficult for them to meet their basic human needs (Farmer, 2003). Structural violence can thus fuel uncertainty and inhibit goals and plans as people lower their expectations of the future. However, looking at the history of South Africa, it can be argued that at some point, society can tolerate these disparities and become biased towards hope (Levy et al., 2021). This is better explained using Hirschman’s cycle on the interaction of development and inequality where there is a growth phase (people tolerate disparities), followed by anger and then reform stage (Levy et al., 2021). Democratic South Africa offered people uncertainty underpinned by hope as they observe and experience the success of other people around them which leads them to hope for their turn regardless of their personal and difficult realities, which Hirschmann termed the ‘tunnel effect’ (Hirschman, 1973).

Internal migration to the urban areas is the indication of the vision of hope as young people search for a better life. Most of these young people are en-route to larger cities and use the local town as a steppingstone towards their bigger dream. Mobility plays a big role in this developmental phase and impacts on the social construction of age and its related expectations as all these concepts are increasingly globalised (Barker et al., 2009). Young migrants in South Africa are managing these different layers of social identities as they experience identity changes from childhood to adulthood which is further complicated by their mobility where they may assume another identity with new responsibilities. These identities, for the young people, tend to be framed by the perceptions that young people hold on what adulthood entails and their image of a successful migrant (Barker et al., 2009; Barratt et al., 2012; Bernays et al., 2021). Part of this involves working at balancing life as they maintain ties with family back home while also trying to fit in, in their new place.

Theoretical framework

This article draws on the concept of uncertainty as a guiding framework in conceptualising the rural-urban migration experience of young migrants. Uncertainty as a theoretical concept provides an optic with which to observe and comprehend the insecurity and precariousness that permeates everyday living and the normalisation of precarity in the lives of mobile young people. Uncertainty is often viewed from a negative perspective, yet it can also provide individuals with space and time to anticipate and aspire for a better life often through hustling (Grabska, 2020; Zeiderman et al., 2015). Uncertainty can offer a positive process of growth and learning, especially in a time when rational decision making is not always possible. This is especially true for migrants and refugees where adaptability is paramount (Johnson & West, 2021; Wehrle et al., 2019).

Positive uncertainty gives young people the ability to focus on a new and better life and the flexibility to change plans as they discover new hurdles and ‘white water rapids’ in these uncharted waters (Debele, 2020). Imagination based on their perception of what the future can be like provides the momentum and drive to pursue that dream. Expectations of mobility or what is hoped for at the end of the journey contributes to the drive that keeps young people focused on the successful life they desire (Glaveanu & Womersley, 2021). This existential mobility of hope provides constant motion towards a ‘better’ future and away from their insufficient presence and environment (Pettit & Ruijtenberg, 2019).

This theoretical framing supports counselling literature that advocates for positive uncertainty, given that the complexity and rapidity of the changing world renders rational decision making almost impossible (Gelatt, 1989). This theoretical lens suggests the importance of the psychological process of positive uncertainty as a key mediating factor in the coping mechanisms of young migrants. Thus, the temporality of hustling is fuelled by aspirations for something other than what they have and is a steppingstone towards another life or destination. According to Elizabeth Cooper and David Patten (2015), uncertainty can be seen as ‘a theory of action’ within a subjunctive mood. Subjunctivity is the intersection of hope and doubt that drive people to action as they look to the future, instead of passivity (Whyte, 2002, 2020). Conceptualising uncertainty within this frame makes it possible to view the dynamic processes of the lived realities of insecurity and ambiguity while also revealing the potential of optimism and aspirations (Debele, 2020; Ryburn, 2018). This perspective of migration and uncertainty may help reveal a different understanding of the various positions that a young migrant can find themselves in while negotiating and constructing their social space in a ‘new society’.

Methods

Study design

Informed by an initial rapid mapping of the study site, a qualitative longitudinal approach was used to explore the experiences of young migrants. This involved two repeat individual interviews, followed by a group discussion workshop. The focus was to explore experiences of mobility, livelihood, educational and recreational activities, and engagement with services. Purposive and convenience sampling approaches were used to provide flexibility to the design. A qualitative approach was most appropriate as the study sought to gain an understanding of young migrants’ experiences and the role that uncertainty plays in their precarious lives. Individual interviews offered a confidential space for the interviewee and the workshops made it possible for a broader discussion with more people.

Study setting

The study was conducted in uMkhanyakude district in KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. uMkhanyakude is one of the most deprived districts in South Africa with high levels of unemployment, high prevalence of HIV and limited resources such as water and electricity. The local majority

are black Africans of the Zulu tribe with most people relying on social grants as their primary source of income. Commercialisation has led to internal migration as people try to move closer to the local town and main transport routes to access work and education.

Recruitment and consent

A team of three research assistants (RAs) recruited young migrants aged 16–24 years old, who had recently arrived in the study site (approximately within the previous year). The RAs were local to the study setting and therefore had a close understanding of the community and population and were fluent in IsiZulu. Each RA was tasked with calling young people from the Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI) surveillance database to give information and request an appointment if they were interested. In addition to this purposive approach, we also adopted a snowballing sampling strategy in which participants were asked to introduce the researchers to other young people that were eligible. For those under the age of 18 years, the RA sought informed consent from the parent/guardian before obtaining assent. Informed consent was obtained before any participation in the research.

Data collection

Thirty-eight young people took part in the first round of interviews between July 2017 and February 2018. The interviews lasted between 20 min to an hour. A second interview was done as a follow up after six to nine months (April 2018 – 18 August 2018) to explore any changes in the young people's experiences and life. Only 11 out of the 38 initial participants were still available and willing to take part in this second interview. The final phase of the data collection involved a group discussion workshop in September 2018. An invitation was extended to the young people that had taken part in the study and five participants took part in the workshop. The focus of the workshop was to discuss preliminary findings and co-design related interventions to support young migrants. Data were collected in IsiZulu, and audio recorded with consent.

Data analysis

Iterative thematic analysis was used, which involved analysing the data simultaneously as data were collected. This is a pragmatic approach that allows the data to guide further collection thus linking data collection and analysis and identifying recurring pattern in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Morgan & Nica, 2020). Weekly debriefing meetings were held to discuss the data and emerging themes of interest both to inform the theoretical recruitment processes and revisions of the topic guide. Open coding was used in the first instance to develop a coding framework which was then applied to all the interview scripts (Charmaz, 2014).

The study was approved by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Biomedical Research Committee (BE471/15). The study was also presented to the Institute's Community Advisory Board which is made up of members of the community including the tribal and civil councils in the local district.

Rigour of the study

Three of the four criteria of rigour proposed by Lincoln and Guba informed the design, implementation, and data analysis of this study (Forero et al., 2018). The design allowed for the concept of credibility through prolonged engagement with the participants through the longitudinal data collection. The RAs involved in the study are native speakers of IsiZulu and underwent extensive training including ethical conduct of research and hold current Good Clinical Practice (GCP) certificates as required by the South African guidelines for conducting research with human participants. Interviews were conducted in the place of preference indicated by the interviewee. Iterative thematic analysis allowed the possibility of cross-checking emerging themes and interpretations made by the researchers (Morgan & Nica, 2020). The workshop made it possible for data triangulation to take place and for interview data interpretation to be checked with participants from the same setting and community. The concept of dependability was achieved through the whole team being involved in reviewing the transcribed material and the codes. The authors (UN, XN, and VN)

conducted initial coding which were discussed during debriefing sessions where senior researchers reviewed and validated the interpretation of the codes to themes.

Results

Participants accounts reveal the challenges of mobile youth transitioning and the forms of structural violence they encounter and experience in the quest for a better life. The findings are presented under four themes that describe the journey of a young person that has migrated to a new community: 1) **Back home compared to the new home** (reconciling life ‘*back home with the new home with new and uncertain practices and cultures*’), 2) **Planning for an ideal future** (the liminal or state of ‘waithood’ they are in, which they consider to be a ‘*a necessary and transient step*’), 3) **Dreams of a bright future** (experiences of coping with precarity in search of happiness in *an ideal future*’ and, 4) **Aspiring to create an ideal future** (revealing hints of optimism and *hope for the future* as a mediator of the present challenges’).

Back home compared to the new home

Most of the young people that were interviewed described the relative safety of the rural areas compared to the urban area which they had moved to. They characterised the latter as being full of crime and promoting a lifestyle of risky behaviours. Even with this knowledge, young people still viewed the urban settings with an element of hope for their future; a setting which, despite the hurdles, provided a pathway to achieving a different life. While their previous ‘home’ had provided a sense of security and protective surveillance because of the proximity of family who watched out for them, the urban areas offered no such protection. A young person leaving home faced a lot of uncertainty because not only did they lack an understanding of their new surroundings, but they were often also adapting to a new urban culture. The change in lifestyle and surroundings exacerbated uncertainty. Even though life in urban settings had easier access to resources and seemed to have greater opportunities for a better life, back home was still talked of as being preferred.

[name of rural area] is alright because it is safer than here. Here it’s also alright but it is not as safe as [rural home]. [20-year-old female]

I would say my home place is better than here ... I am familiar with surroundings at home, I grew up there, I know the lifestyle there but here I am not sure what is going on. [23-year-old female]

I like to stay in rural area. What I like about [the] rural area is that, in rural area there is respect. You get respected when you are in rural area but in township, in township I don’t like it. ... [22-year-old male]

The positive aspects of the rural area were compared with the negative aspects of the access to resources afforded in the urban areas. The urban area gave increased opportunities to engage in risky behaviours like drinking alcohol and smoking. In rural settings access to alcohol and cigarettes was often difficult, which curtailed misuse. A 23 year old woman commented:

In the rural area they don’t drink most of the time because they don’t get it nearby. They don’t smoke because they don’t get it nearby. Here in townships, they drink and smoke because they get it nearby from friends.

This young woman went on to note that the things they had available in the urban areas, such as water and fairly consistent electricity. She recounted how this proximal access had changed them, even making them ‘lazy’ so that when they went to visit their rural home ‘*it becomes a problem [...]. They change. That when we come back from the township, we don’t know anything, that’s what they say [parents], we know nothing.*

For other young people the access to these resources was important and trumped their preference for the urban environment over the rural. Access increased opportunities and provided an alternative form of safety to that of the rural ‘home’, as this improved their access to essential services including healthcare which was harder to access in the rural areas:

At [name of rural area] it was all right but the issue was shortage of water. The school was too far when going to it, crossing the river and when it was heavily raining, we were unable to go to school. You can't go to school if it was raining. [22-year-old male]

Water is too far there in [rural area] and there is no borehole ... The transport come at any time; ... When there is someone injured and should be taken to clinic you have to hire a car because you can't get it easily. It's transport and water. [22-year-old male]

One young man commented on the freedom he had in the urban area to have a girlfriend without having to explain his new relationship to his relatives. The access to resources, opportunities and new freedom in the urban environment facilitated their 'hustle' and helped them to feel optimistic about building their future in their new home.

Planning for an ideal future

Young people transitioning to adulthood feel the pressures of fulfilling and maintaining societal expectations of adulthood. The social identity of being an adult involves being employed and being a contributing member of society. Young people's descriptions of their lives portrayed an awareness and acceptance that the urban environment was a place they could achieve adulthood despite the higher risks. Increased risk came with more opportunities which would give them the chance to aspire to be adult members of society. All these factors contributed to young people's preference for 'making their lives' in the new urban place, in part due to what it offered immediately but also because of how it facilitated their imagining of what their lives could potentially become in their ideal future. These opportunities presented pathways such as hustling which gave a means or catalyst to propel them to something better. This hustling happens amid uncertainty and even when disappointed when plans did not come to fruition, they did not lose hope. Young people who had 'piece' jobs (part-time employment) for example and faced considerable uncertainty over how they could make a living, still maintained a focus on the hope of eventually reaching their desired goal.

Like as I am doing admin, it is not something I like. Nursing, to be a nurse is what I would like to do very much. I think when I finish learning admin, I will be able to then continue and pursue what I want to do on the side. [23-year-old female]

This young woman, who had some part time administrative work was unusual. Most often it was the men who got 'piece' jobs while the women worked as a domestic worker or child minder with relatives or people they knew.

Even the young people who could not find employment, spoke of making plans to change their liminal state in the urban environment and were 'hustling' towards something better. Even though they were not always actioning those plans the activity of 'hustling' provided a sense of dynamism, of making progress. Hustling was part of their survival mechanism which also provided a way of striving for a livelihood and hope while navigating through the uncertainties of their immediate future. A 22 year old man observed that:

I am not studying currently. The issue is when I stay there, I need money. So, I still want to arrange but I will fix those subjects. Yes, I will fix those subject because matric certificate is important. I will fix it.

Despite the setbacks there could still be a way to 'fix it'; even without knowing how. He was optimistic that he would be able to sort things out.

Dreams of a bright future

Throughout their accounts, young people remained hopeful amid challenges and uncertainties of being in a new environment. They navigated the complex processes of structural violence such as unemployment and poverty but still focused on their path towards a bright future in an urban setting. They often described the daily struggles and the precarious life they are exposed to in the towns in their quest for 'happiness'. The anticipation of what their future dreams could

bring, although uncertain, made the precarity tolerable. While they could not ignore these structural challenges, given that they were their lived reality, they rather intentionally looked forward to a future free of poverty. The young people held the belief that by surviving the risky environment of urban places, they were closer to their imagined happier self in the future. This narrative of survival often revolved around differentiating themselves by managing to stay away from risks and portraying ‘others’ as being involved in risky behaviours such as smoking illicit drugs and drinking alcohol which they were not a part of.

It’s that here around the community it’s the young boys who are smoking. You can see that they smoke loose cigarette, you see them following each other into the forest there and you see by the smoke going up. They smoke cannabis. [20-year-old male]

Okay, okay, most of the time young people are involved in drug use, they drink alcohol, yes [Gambu, name of alcohol], they get a lot of opportunities to have fun and other things they can do. [23-year-old female]

Young women reported being more sheltered or protected from engaging in risky behaviour than young men as the adults they lived with dictated who they could interact with and what they could do. As migrants, they also pointed to their lack of tacit knowledge of the new place and their reliance on other people to help them navigate their way. In explaining how they were protected, and did not engage with risk, they described the risks posed by drinking alcohol, for example, which led their peers to be subjected to rape, unprotected sex, and sexual encounters with people other than their partners.

Others they drink and end up doing unprotected sex and get HIV ... They end up drunk and end up unaware who took them, and how. Maybe that person is sick and end up infected too. [23-year-old female]

The young women were concerned that the places they lived in were dangerous with serious crime including murder, violence, and rape.

Here, people kill each other, you find in the morning news that a person has been killed there or they shoot him/her on the road, and also people get drunk and fight and beat each other because of alcohol. [17-year-old female]

They explained, in general terms how they needed to navigate their way through this risky environment and to exercise care to avoid being victims of crime or rape. Some of the young men also mentioned the particular risks young women faced. A 22-year-old man observed:

Crime, [...] someone [can] just break in here. Maybe he is aware that there is no male here, when he breaks in here and call his group to kidnap to ladies for rape them, it is that kind of crime.

None of the young women explained her strategies for avoiding the risks ‘others’ faced.

The young people became reconciled to the risks of such environments, assuming that ‘moving forward’ in achieving their goals would move them away from their current proximity to such risks. They faced uncertainty in achieving their goals based on the general unpredictability of the future but still hoped for better things to come. In the interviews young people invested considerable time in talking about making plans and even when these had not been actioned, they asserted their belief that their plans were achievable even in the face of obstacles. Even if the goal was not achievable, they still had a plan to live by and pin their hopes on.

Aspiring to create an ideal future amid adversities

Amid all the challenges shared by the young people and the adversity experienced, there were undertones of hope, optimism, and a sense of nurturing ambition. They all described how they were on a journey towards certain aspirations which involved better education and sustainable employment. They talked about the dreams they had. This involved trying to save money to be able to afford to move towards attaining their dreams, through enrolling in further education or training. For some, saving the little money they earned was difficult, but they still did not leave their wishes and dreams. They planned and talked about their hopes.

The money I get, I think, I plan on saving it so I can carry on studying because I have certificates, I wish to do a diploma in the thing I was doing, so yes. But that doesn't happen, it [the money] is too little, it can't be saved. [23-year-old female]

Others shared dreams about employment without providing any specifics of the job and expressed a desire to get married and have a family, fulfilling social and religious expectations and gaining social recognition as an adult.

Me ... obviously is to get job and then get married, currently what I am working on. So, I will get a steady job so that I will be able to support my family. I am not a person who want big things. My standard of living is different as I have said that religiously we are living a different life. So, we live a simple life. [23-year-old male]

Some had fixed their dreams on getting a particular job; some of the young women wanted to be nurses (as described above) or doctors: a 17 year old woman said: *'the thing I want to be I want to be a doctor. Before I wanted to be a teacher, but I see that career doesn't pay well'*. One young man spoke in concrete terms about his plans to become a disc-jockey. The dream was to gain recognition and visibility in the community as a successful person.

I was doing science at school. Since I started doing science there are those IT things, my dream is to become a well known IT in a province or the whole community, if that dream can come true. [20-year-old male].

Young people simultaneously experienced despair about their current struggles and hope of having their dreams come true. The uncertainty of their past life and their hustle are also guided by their emotions and experience of their environment around them as they see the different professions and jobs and other activities that peers or people older than them pursue. The young people plan and have hopes of attaining similar pursuits as people that have travelled the journey before them. This hope makes the process of living in a precarious setting more bearable.

Discussion

An initial objective of the project was to gain an in-depth understanding of young migrants' experiences and the role that uncertainty plays in their precarious lives. Our analysis reveals the way that mobile young people live through adversity while negotiating instability and uncertainty to get to what they deem to be a better future. The perspectives of young migrants in rural KwaZulu-Natal show the fragility of 'waithood' in resource limited settings and the lengths to which these young people will go to in pursuit of a better life. For some even though the prospect of their desired future seems unattainable, they do not lose hope and still talk about their plans. Our findings are consistent with those of Stasik et al. (2020) who suggested that youth in Africa are caught in a stage of waiting for a better future, and in the process of 'waithood' they plan and hustle. A better life is often associated with moving to urban towns that are as rife with risks as opportunities, both of which young people must contend with in the pursuit of happiness. Theoretically, one source of uncertainty involves the lack of tacit knowledge of the new place they have moved to which may be in conflict their values and culture (Williams & Baláz, 2012). This imperfect knowledge of the new place may present an individual with conflicting risks of not knowing how to adapt and yet are still faced with the realities of making decisions about their life. Decisions are therefore mostly based on intuition which can heighten the risks that one is exposed to. These risks, in particular health risks due to sexual behaviours, may be a challenge to contend with as the different settings may have differing local sexual norms and young people may want to fit in with (Deane et al., 2016). The joy of anticipation asserts that individuals experience intense positive emotions from imagining, and where feasible planning for, future events. These positive emotions contribute to wellbeing and life satisfaction and reduce fears and anxieties linked to mobility (Glaveanu & Womersley, 2021). This could explain why these young migrants remain in what is seen as a precarious environment.

The narratives run through a discourse of uncertainty and insecurity with expectations of adulthood being challenged, as the young people seem to be stuck in a stage of being dependent on other

people due to financial hardships, lack of employment, and a lack of funds to pursue desired education to improve their prospects and future (Honwana, 2014). During this ambiguous and uncertain liminal space that these young people found themselves in, they contend with the social and cultural context of adolescence, while negotiating their identities during a crisis of poverty, adversity, and uncertainty (Crivello & van der Gaag, 2016). The unpredictability of the future may also disrupt these developing identities as the basis of future expectations is largely unknown.

In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that developing their identity can be challenging for mobile young people that are caught between different cultures of belongingness in their old place and their new home. The social structures of the two places may be different (urban and rural settings) and therefore the young person's identity is shaped by these two differing structures as they try to coexist within these two orientations (Gasparini, 2004). The sense of 'othering' or being an outsider in a new place can also impact on how a young person sees themselves and constrain identity formation (Schwartz et al., 2018; Uдах & Singh, 2019). Other researchers have reported that young people that move to urban settings may feel a sense of inferiority due to what they perceive as coming from a poorer rural background (Yuan et al., 2013; Zhang, 2017). The different lifestyle in the city and new culture which may conflict with their values can make them stand out and prevent full integration with peers. For others they may choose to adopt these new cultures and practices causing internal turmoil as they attempt to fit. An example expressed is how certain behaviours like drinking alcohol or having a girlfriend/boyfriend are characterised by social disapproval in rural areas but carry a social currency in the urban areas where such behaviour is anticipated and seen as part of the local youth culture.

From a phenomenological perspective, the young people's identities evolve considering these tensions in their changing environment as they struggle to attain adulthood. Their subjective reality is affected by their past world, their new world, and their anticipated future. Internal migrants may have the expectation of less adjustment since they are in the same country, speaking the same language. However, there is a big divide between urban and rural spheres and young people from rural setting may identify as being less advantaged compared to urban counterparts which exposes them to even more discrimination than expected due to their 'backward rural' status (Yuan et al., 2013). All these vulnerabilities linked to acculturation have an impact on psychological adaptation and influence identity formation as the young person's self-concept is challenged and they do not have the support of family boundaries and stability of choice (Carbajal, 2020; Rabiau, 2018).

The young people's accounts provide us with insights into their journey to adulthood and how the realities of where they have moved to touch on and influence their daily lives. As young people raised in rural areas, the town or city provides new opportunities, but is also rife with adversity, high HIV prevalence, lack of familial and peer support and opportunities for engaging in risky behaviours (Dungey & Ansell, 2020). They express a sense of apprehension due to their understanding of the negative influences and uncertainty around them due to their new environment and the risks it brings. However, they also show tenacity in seeking to survive and manage while living in challenging adversities. They use resourcefulness in their 'hustle' to live through that adversity to get to a different place and in most narratives a central mechanism to achieve this is through education (Amit & Dyck, 2012; Dungey & Ansell, 2020). The understanding of these negative behaviours is portrayed by their description of how 'others' are involved in risky behaviours, and never them, as they seem to have plans and goals to achieve. This apprehension and fear of their surroundings is an interplay between uncertainty and insecurity of their future and how they will arrive at that future place they aspire for.

Interestingly, the findings also portray mobile young people's experientially distinct temporalities of their current state and that of their 'bright' future. There are similarities between the attitudes with the interaction of hope expressed by young people in this study and the principle of hope described by Cresswell, that young people focus all their energy on a future that is yet to come (Cresswell, 2012), which helps them to cope with the uncertainty of the temporality of their current life which is full of adversity (Glaveanu & Womersley, 2021). Bloch's principle of hope is an 'exploration of the possible

reality of utopia' and how the human spirit has the ability to imagine a better future (Bloch, 1986). If that future has not arrived, the possibility of its eventuality gives them hope to nurture their ambitions and dreams. In some instances, what constitutes their imagined futures continually changes as they experience an extended state of 'waithood'. However, their imagined future asserts a semblance of structure to their lives and purpose to the 'piece' jobs and other situations they may find themselves in. This resourcefulness involves a form of 'hustling' as a way of making a living and getting to a certain ideal as they navigate the prolonged period of uncertainties of urban life and of transition between childhood and adulthood (Thieme, 2018).

This temporality of waiting has important implications on survival and dealing with the uncertainties of a precarious life and conceptualises the bridge or journey from the young people's present life and the future as described by Jane Guyer's 'punctuated time' (Guyer, 2007; Yeoh et al., 2020). Although life may be full of uncertainty and this 'waithood' that mobile young people are living is characterised by uncertainty, this may be more desirable to the young people as it provides the potential of change, a momentum which fosters optimism and aspirations (Debele, 2020; Stasik et al., 2020) also described as 'waiting in motion' (Lagji, 2019). The opposite would make young people passive as they would awaken to the realisation that their future goals are unattainable and would consequently stop the actions and proactive movement of their daily lives (Bear, 2014).

Implications of the research for theory, future research, practice, and policy

Our findings contribute to the emerging literature on viewing the waithood of migrant young people as a difficult but potentially sustaining stage that provides some structure and purpose to everyday lives encouraging proactivity (Bear, 2014; Mujere, 2020; Stasik et al., 2020). The dialectic of uncertainty and hope provide an understanding of how young people may develop the ability and resilience to live through adversity in anticipation of a planned near or distant future. Our study findings highlight the complex narratives of migrant young people in their search for a better life and the fluid nature of the process of being on a journey to a desired future. However, there is a range of unresolved questions worthy of further research, in response to both the limitations of the current study and to further advance our understanding. For example, how do the characteristics of these experiences vary by age, place, historical moment, or migration status; how is the uncertainty specific; does it lend the uncertainty a creative dimension which frames it as vaguely tolerable, at least temporarily? The consideration of such questions would help contribute to targeted interventions to support the needs of young people in their local communities and contexts.

Strengths and limitations

Finally, a few important limitations need to be considered. First, the modest sample size as appropriate for exploratory qualitative work means the findings may not necessarily be generalisable beyond the study setting. We also acknowledge that even though the intent of the study was to use in-depth interviews, a few interviews were quite short and did not provide much detail on participants' experiences, although still produced valuable knowledge. The specific focus on localised context is highly appropriate to our research question and our subsequent use of qualitative methodology. Secondly, the study experienced loss to follow up for the second interview. This was due to migration patterns as the young people had moved from the area as reported in the first interview. However, the workshop made it possible for data triangulation and data interpretation checking as participants engaged with the data in suggesting potential interventions that could assist them as young people. We propose a theoretical interpretation of young mobile people's experiences offering a different perspective on how uncertainty is viewed. The element of uncertainty can bring the possibility of still finding a bright future and does not always diminish hope. This alternative view of positive uncertainty however does not overlook the realities of the structural violence and vulnerabilities that these young people face which need to be addressed within our society as they impact on health, wellbeing, and quality of life.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to investigate the experiences of mobile young people in the new area they have migrated to with the intention of developing supportive interventions during this stage of their lives and journey. The findings of this study highlight the importance of positive uncertainty in the precarious lives of young migrants and how it is experienced. We have described how uncertainty can provide protection amid insecurity, risks, vulnerabilities, ambiguity but also foster an investment in the possibility of opportunity. Even within positive uncertainty, it is important to acknowledge the role of structural violence and to understand how these vulnerabilities and inequalities can have a detrimental impact on young people. While some individuals are resilient and navigate these precarious environments with hope, it must be stressed that these structural barriers function to maintain systems of inequality that contribute to a poor quality of life and exacerbate health disparities. The results of this research support the idea that uncertainty is not always a negative occurrence but rather can support growth for individuals.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, NN upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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