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Caregivers of early adolescent children: Influences of their apartheid experiences on their intergenerational learning practices

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This study aimed to explore the experiences of apartheid that South African caregivers share with their early-adolescent children. Utilising a qualitative exploratory inquiry approach, we interviewed eight participants (male = 1; age range: 29–55 years old; black = 3; coloured = 3; white = 2) within the Cape Town Metropole area, South Africa. The researchers inquired about caregivers' experiences relating to apartheid and how conversations about apartheid may influence early-adolescents' social and identity development. Following thematic analysis, findings revealed two themes, namely: caregiver perceptions of incredulity by the adolescent children; and the adolescent children's reluctance to discuss emotionally laden topics from the apartheid period. Caregivers shared minimally about emotionally laden topics from the apartheid era. Findings suggest an intergenerational disconnect between the older and younger generation cohorts regarding post-apartheid personal identities.

Keywords: adolescent, apartheid, caregiver, intergenerational learning, race and identity

Introduction

In a post-colonial society, there may be an intergenerational divide in how citizens understand their present social realities and what they value in their situations as influenced by their lived experiences (Adonis, 2018; Gouws, 2018, 2019; Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). While the older generation would share with younger generations about their colonial period experiences, it is often not clear what they would share, why, and how (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). Historical continuities are a fact of social transitions as are major historical disruptions (Amadeo et al., 2012; Gouws, 2018, 2019; Kirkinis et al., 2021; Yeoh et al., 2020). South Africa is a case in point for a society in transition, and in which the younger generations have a decidedly different socio-political experience than their older generations (Amadeo et al., 2012). The older generation of South Africans continue to be influenced in their present social realities, while reflecting on their socio-political histories (Amoateng et al., 2006). Younger generations of South Africans, who were born after 1994, did not experience apartheid first-hand but gain knowledge about the apartheid era at school and through socialising with their older generation family.

Recounting the lived experiences of a colonial era forms a part of the cultural transition of values and aspirations across societies (Vandeyar, 2019; Yeoh et al., 2020). In South Africa, apartheid was implemented from 1948 to 1994, and was an era characterised by racial segregation and gross infringement of the human rights of the indigenous populations (Jensen & Zenker, 2018; Seekings & Nattrass, 2008). At the core of apartheid was a set of laws that prioritised the interest of one racial group within all domains of living, alongside grossly unequal lack of personal and community development for the other South African racial groups (Jensen & Zenker, 2018; Nnaemeka et al., 2019; Seekings & Nattrass, 2008). The apartheid social system practiced discrimination based solely on skin colour (Seekings & Nattrass, 2008). Undoing

the legacy is a work in progress for achieving racial equity 25 years after the demise of apartheid (Amoateng et al., 2006; Cejas, 2007; Harris, 2016; Naidoo et al., 2016; South African Institute for Race Relations [SAIRR], 2018). Conversations about apartheid by older generation family are primary socialisation on the apartheid environment and experiences (Gouws, 2018, 2019).

The cohort that experienced apartheid first-hand is presently in middle- to late-adulthood (Gouws, 2018, 2019; Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). Many of them are caregivers to the younger generation of South Africans, acting as cultural brokers and providing developmentally appropriate guidance on goals, with historical grounding (Muthivhi & Broom, 2009). For instance, younger generation South Africans would need a historical context about persisting racial tension in contemporary South Africa post-apartheid (Harris, 2016; Meiring et al., 2018; Naidoo et al., 2016).

Children often rely on their caregivers' stories, perceptions, and experiences to place their identity development into the present-day context (Gouws, 2018, 2019; Vandeyar, 2019). The socialisation of children by the older generation cohort would influence the children's socio-political identities (Baferani, 2015; Frønes, 2016; Laursen & Collins, 2009; Morrow, 2011; Muthivhi & Broom, 2009; Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). We expect that the older generation would socialise the younger generation backgrounding their apartheid experiences (Baferani, 2015; Frønes, 2016; Maccoby, 1992; Morrow, 2011).

Such socialisation stories would include details of what, where, who, when, why, and how events occurred and the associated meanings (Amoateng et al., 2006; Cejas, 2007; Gouws, 2018, 2019; Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019; SAIRR, 2018). The media and schools would also be significant socialisation agents about the apartheid era (Carvalho-Malekane, 2015; French et al., 2006; Gouws, 2018, 2019; Hughes & Johnson, 2001; Laursen & Collins,

2009; Pillay, 2017; Western Cape Education Department, 2020), and perhaps at a less personal level than the older family members.

Goal of study

This study explored the experiences of apartheid that South African caregivers share with their early-adolescent children. Our specific research questions were:

- What intergenerational learning about apartheid do caregivers engage in with their adolescent children?
- How do caregivers perceive their sharing of experiences about apartheid to influence their adolescent children's understanding of, and reaction to, apartheid?

Method

Research design

We utilised a qualitative exploratory research design (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) to characterise caregivers subjective personal accounts. A qualitative exploratory study approach was appropriate for understanding caregiver's constructions of lived experiences of intergenerational learning with their children regarding their apartheid experiences. Social constructions inform narratives of important life issues to individuals (Muthivhi & Broom, 2009).

Participants and setting

We purposively selected eight informants for this study, all from the Cape Town Metropole region (females = 7). Three of the participants identified their race as "black", two as "white", and three as "coloured". The ages of female participants ranged from 29–52 years of age. The male participant was aged 55 at the time of data collection. The informants were of diverse socio-economic statuses (low = 37.5%; middle = 37.5%; high = 25%).

Procedure and data collection

The Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape granted ethics approval for the study. The informants voluntarily consented to participate and were informed of their rights to confidentiality. We also informed them of their right to withdraw from the study without penalty. Interviews took place at participants' homes.

The interviewer was from a privileged background but was fully briefed and guided in terms of the sensitive nature of the questions, the tone used, acknowledging the perception of potential power differentials, and how her background may affect emotionally laden topics.

Data collection

The informants responded to semi-structured interview questions based on what and how they shared their apartheid experiences with their adolescent children. An example of a question was: "How does your child/ren usually react to discussions on the topic of apartheid?". Participants were asked to describe how they share their apartheid experiences with their children, and which experiences they choose to share with their children on the topic of apartheid. Examples of questions included:

"What kind of discussions topics do you have with your adolescent child about apartheid?" and "How do you think the experiences you share with your adolescent child may influence their understanding of and reaction to apartheid?". Data trustworthiness was achieved through debriefing with the respondents and member-checking. We also maintained an audit trail of the interviews for data integrity. The interviews were conducted in English with participants who were fluent in English.

Data analysis

We thematically analysed the data according to the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006; Braun et al., 2019) which included familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, and defining and naming the themes. We compared the emerging themes among ourselves to eliminate any discrepancies in interpretations.

Findings and discussion

Two themes emerged from the data analysis, namely: (i) caregivers' perceptions of incredulity by the adolescent children; and (ii) reluctance to discuss emotionally laden topics from the apartheid period. We consider the themes in detail below and provide evidence from the interview data.

Theme 1: Perceptions of incredulity by the adolescent children

The participants perceived their adolescent children to disbelieve their stories within the apartheid period. For example, the participants reported that their adolescent children would react in shock and disbelief in response to statements on how people were classified within the apartheid period. Examples include:

... apartheid is ... the separation of people. And people were judged by their skin colour, your background, your hair-type, which area you come from, the language you speak, your family, if you are rich or if you are poor. That is basically what is keeping the minority one side. (Participant 7, female, coloured, 43)

When I tell them (adolescents) about the separate cutlery ... then my daughter would react with shock saying but that's very rude mommy when I tell them that when we used to go to the beach for holiday and on the beaches only the white people were allowed and the black individuals couldn't even go swimming. (Participant 3, male, black, 55)

I went to the doctor and I was really sick, and because only the whites must be treated first and I actually was in some argument fight with an older person, which I also don't normally do, but I was so sick and now I must still wait because I'm not white. (Participant 6, female, coloured, 39)

Despite the sombre picture painted by media and literature (Adorjan & Chui, 2013; Cejas, 2007; Gee & Ford, 2011; Pillay, 2017; Williams et al., 2008), the theme of youth incredulity about historic racism practices suggest social progress towards a more humane era both

globally and within a post-apartheid South Africa (Gouws, 2018, 2019; Western Cape Education Department, 2020). Intergenerational learning is a proven cultural survivorship approach for identity development in younger generations (Chadha & Malik, 2010), equipping them for social transformational leadership (Golding & Foley, 2017).

Globally, the United States and many western nations struggle with the same historic heritage of racism rooted in 'white' supremacy including ideologies from the colonial era (Jackson, 2017). Examples of these acts involve violence and structural brutality on non-white groups to retain structural inequalities (Chadha & Malik, 2010; Gee & Ford, 2011; Jackson, 2017). This trend may be changing with the younger generations practicing equality and good citizenship (Adorjan & Chui, 2013; Gee & Ford, 2011), as indicated in their astonishment about the historic injustices by older generation political systems (Gee & Ford, 2011).

Theme 2: Caregiver reluctance to discuss emotionally laden topics from the apartheid period

Caregivers said to be somewhat uncomfortable telling all about the racial practices during apartheid. As examples, they shared their discomfort with emotionally laden topics as follows:

My brother was an activist [and] the police came for [with] tear gas and the dogs... beating... They [police] kicked down the door looking for my brother, beating my mom [and] destroyed everything in the house. They shot dead a young man who just happened to be running by. (Participant 5, female, coloured, 37)

In my mind, I don't want to let it [apartheid] In my mind, I don't want to let it [apartheid] identify them. I don't want them to have that baggage. I don't want them to have that attitude, because we are trying to build a new South Africa. That is why when we moved to stay here [different location] we tried to put them in the same schools like the community. Then because of that we didn't want them to go with an attitude. So we didn't tell them too much about the past, because it creates anger and you know we don't want our kids to feel it. (Participant, female, black, 52)

Furthermore, some caregivers felt that they did not want to burden their adolescents with the emotionally encumbered history of South Africa, and rather chose to refrain from discussing apartheid with them. The following quotes showcase the various motivations caregivers gave for their reluctance to discuss apartheid with their adolescent/s:

I think I want to shield her from hating white people, and hatred, or hating any people for that matter. (Participant 5, female, coloured, 37)

And also I don't want to give them my opinion... because then I'm just as bad. Then I am teaching them the wrong thing. So my children can ask me at any time, they can ask me what it was like. I can give them how I saw it or how I lived it, but I don't want to give them the wrong opinion, so I generally

don't discuss politics. (Participant 3, male, black, 55)

A caregiver disclosed emotionally laden experiences on how the adolescent projected his emotions toward a racial comment within a schooling environment. However, the caregiver said to have made her adolescent child understand the dynamics of racial indifference in post-apartheid South Africa.

My son was involved in a racial argument at school, ... he was doing his grade 6. So he was called by [a classmate] in derogatory terms ... very angry. ... and said he wanted nothing to do with whites and want to go to a "black" school. I told him about a lot of lovely white people out there, like my cousin ... she's married to a white man. Uhm, I think it helped him. (Participant 1, female, black, 29)

Caregivers said of the adolescents that they refrained from discussing emotionally laden topics with them.

Because when you have a teenager at home, the minute you talk they are like okay I'm going to my room. They don't want to talk about feelings, and that's also what he tells me mom look here I don't want to talk, even asking him about school he is like no woman I'm going, it's really terrible, some of the time I wanted to cry, this was when he was starting with this teenager thing I didn't understand what he was going through and I thought yoh my son doesn't like me. (Participant 5, female, coloured, 37)

He thinks he knows... enough, and obviously around his friends I don't know what the friends think about the apartheid, and what is happening now and what they see on TV. So, he's not he doesn't really talk about it. (Participant 2, female, black, 52)

The mutual reluctance by caregivers and their charges to discuss racially charged topics is frequently reported within literature on post-colonial race relations (Ginsburg, 2001; Laursen & Collins, 2009; Sillars et al., 2005). Emotional afflictions from experiences of political violence are hard to overcome (Jacobs, 2017). The political agenda of 'white' cultural supremacy over the 'mixed' race minority (Dreyer et al., 2020) is an intergenerational story which can never be fully recounted due to the hurt it arouses in the victims. Yet this was common practice during the apartheid regime (Dreyer et al., 2020; Gee & Ford, 2011; Jackson, 2017; Schwartz, 2020; Sonn, 2012), and rarely talked about (Adorjan & Chui, 2013; Gee & Ford, 2011; Jackson, 2017).

These were trauma experiences that nevertheless define resilience and survivorship today from race-based brutality and inequality (Berenguer, 2017; Dreyer et al., 2020). Intergenerational learning is important to the ethnic and racial identity development of adolescents (French et al., 2006; Hughes & Johnson, 2001) and their sense of group membership (Gouws, 2018, 2019). Caregivers may want to protect or shield adolescents from vicarious

trauma experience of historical narratives of racial turmoil (Carvalho-Malekane, 2015; Hughes & Johnson, 2001).

Implications for adolescent identity development

The repercussions of the apartheid white supremacy ideology continue to plague the South African population (Amoateng et al., 2006; Cejas, 2007; SAIRR, 2018), and other international settings. Younger generations who live in contemporary South Africa and who did not experience apartheid first-hand need intergenerational learning for them to know how to make sense of their present circumstances from the cumulative racial disadvantages from the apartheid era (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019; Vandeyar, 2019). Teenagers with an appreciation of their historical past would be better able to chart their future lives (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019).

The future of South Africa is premised on progress in terms of South African racial relations and social cohesion (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019; Vandeyar, 2019). Caregiver choices, regarding whether or not to share their apartheid experiences with their early adolescent, would influence the children's racial identity development (Gouws, 2018, 2019). Caregivers may benefit from interventions to support them in ways to discuss emotionally loaded intergenerational learning experiences important to explaining the children's present life circumstances.

Limitations and recommendations

We collected data from a small convenience sample and there is a need for replication and extension studies on our findings. Moreover, we did not disaggregate the findings by education levels (Brunsdon, 2017; Karpov, 2003). This social gradient factor may colour people's realities and judgments about historical events in which human rights were violated (Brunsdon, 2017; Karpov, 2003). Future studies should seek to analyse the data by level of education for a more nuanced understanding of child caregiver concerns in post-apartheid South Africa.

Conclusion

We found caregivers to both understand and appreciate how their adolescent children in contemporary South Africa process apartheid period stories with incredulity. They perceive the younger generation have difficulty in believing stories on apartheid practices, and caregivers may refrain from emotionally laden topics about apartheid to minimize vicarious trauma on their children. Caregivers considered the younger generation to have a sense of compassion and humanity in their disbelief of apartheid practices. On the other hand, findings suggest communication nuances between caregiver and their adolescent children post-apartheid to protect the younger generations in charting their identity development.

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