

Experiences of Black Single Mothers Raising Adolescent Boys

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ABSTRACT Although many South African households are headed by single mothers, not much is known about their experiences of raising adolescent boys. Previous research has failed to address this experience of black single mothers who also experience socio-economic, psychosocial and educational challenges. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to explore and describe the experiences of black single mothers raising adolescent boys. The findings can serve as a starting point to create social development programs to effectively address the psychosocial challenges of these mothers. A qualitative approach and the descriptive phenomenological research design were followed. Semi-structured interviews were held with three participants. The collected data were analysed according to the principles of the descriptive. It was found, among others, that the participants were experiencing financial challenges, physical and mental issues, increased responsibility, and social insecurity. Gender, tradition, spirituality and health issues seemed to have a great impact on the experiences of these single mothers. It is recommended that social development programs be created to assist single mothers in raising their adolescent sons more effectively.

INTRODUCTION

It appears that a relatively large number of research projects concerning black single mothers have been conducted in North America. It is therefore not surprising that research on the experiences of black single mothers who raise adolescent boys in South Africa is not widely available. Thus, this study aims to address this silence in the literature in part. The feminism serves as theoretical perspective to explore the phenomenon of black single mothers raising adolescent boys.

One goal of the feminist movement is to support women to understand their struggle with the patriarchal order and offer them the space to appreciate their limitations, joy and pain like any other person. This movement, therefore, does not aim to idealise women (Maguire 1996). This study also does not aim to idealise black single mothers. The focus is rather on these mothers' experiences raising adolescent boys. For Sharkey (2016), feminism deals with, inter alia, the following aspects: the fact that women and men share similar general human attributes; the eradication of the origin of women's oppression; and the development of women to achieve their real

potential. Because of the psychosocial circumstances of black single mothers in South Africa, they seem to find it difficult to reach their full potential. Social programs specifically developed for black single mothers can support them in the process of developing their potential. Gist (2016) highlights the marginalisation of black women "through institutional structures and practices, social norms, and ideological elitism". Feminism is, therefore, committed to promote rights and dignity of women so that, as human beings, they can develop their full potential at all levels of society.

According to Kapsalis (as cited in Poirot 2014), Freud was of the opinion that the male child could develop lifelong castration anxiety because of the trauma of seeing a vagina. The penis envy theory and female hysteria could have contributed to the feminist counterattack on the psychoanalytic theory, because gender-related issues were used to suppress women (O'Brien 2016). This argument should not be interpreted as an attempt to create a genderless community because Sharkey (2016) mentions that, if differences between men and women are not identified and highlighted, male dominance will prevail. For this reason, it is essential that women

do not ignore these differences. In other words, it is rather about the recognition and the acknowledgement of women, and in this case the recognition and acknowledgment of the black single mother raising adolescent boys. Some feminist researchers suggest that the experiences of women should not only be described, but also interpreted in the context of male supremacy. In this way, social inequalities of patriarchy can be uncovered (Padgett 2017). Gender differences per se are therefore not the challenge. The dilemma is male supremacy.

Kirst-Ashman (2017) lists five constructs to explain feminism. The current authors drew from these constructs to operationalise feminism in the context of this paper. The first construct is equality, which pertains to equality for not only black single mothers raising adolescent boys, but also for all marginalised minority groups. Secondly, feminism personifies beliefs, as well as actions. Because feminism holds a view of equality for all, black single mothers have to be included. Thirdly, feminism embraces all aspects of life, from personal to political views. Thus, black single mothers have the right to their views. The fourth feminist construct refers to education and advocacy. Black single mothers have the right to education and to educate other people regarding their daily struggles. The fifth and last feminist construct is all about appreciation of individual differences. Black single mothers should be empowered to use their personal capabilities, and not to see their gender as a limitation to achieve their potential.

According to Vargas et al. (2016), a single-mother family is a family maintained by a mother. Single parenthood can be attributed to the physical absence of the other parent as a result of death, divorce or neglect. The single mother is, thus, responsible for the child's biopsychosocial-spiritual and economic well-being. Robinson and Werblow (2012) make the following statement about the multi-responsibilities of the black single mother bringing up a boy: "... the care of black sons has been laid at the feet of their mothers". The responsibility to raise a son as a black single mother is immense. These responsibilities and challenges of the black single mother are briefly outlined below.

Buvinic and Gupta (as cited in Rajaram 2009) explain that single mothers have more dependents than other households, work for lower wages and have less access to resources, in

addition to the household chores they have to attend to. Thus, the prevalence of poverty is greater among single-mother families. Single mothers with financial strains are forced to live in poorer neighbourhoods due to a lack of resources and social support from their communities (Rajaram 2009; Hartmann and Burk 2012:12). In South Africa the apartheid system further contributed to the development of racial segregation and poor neighbourhoods (Reid-Henry and Sending 2014). All these challenges may have a negative impact on the caring of their adolescent sons.

Sterrett et al. (2016) mention that African-American youth of single-mother families tend to act out their psychosocial challenges, but that this population's challenges do not receive adequate scientific attention. The lack of literature in the African context regarding this phenomenon confirms the findings of the above authors. The youth's externalisation of their psychosocial challenges probably contributes to the emotional burden of the black single mother raising an adolescent boy. However it is also important to take note of several international studies indicating that black single mothers have the inner psychosocial spiritual abilities, strengths and qualities to raise their sons positively. It is, therefore, necessary to guard against a focus on the negative and to conduct more studies on why and how black single mothers are able to raise their sons with a positive outcome (Robinson and Werblow 2012, 2013; Mendenhall et al. 2013). Consequently, it is important to "listen" also for the strengths of black single mothers when researching their experiences. Furthermore, a focus on the capabilities of the black single mother may reduce dependence on a patriarchal order.

Objective

The objective of this descriptive phenomenological study is to explore and describe the experiences of black single mothers raising adolescent boys in a semi-urban area in South Africa.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was followed. This was done because the authors aimed to obtain a rich description (Engelbrecht 2016) of the experiences of black single mothers raising adolescent boys as a basis for future re-

search. The authors also intend to use the findings to develop social programs to assist these mothers therapeutically.

Some of the principles of the phenomenology of practice were applied to conduct the research. The phenomenology of practice concerns the integration of phenomenological research practice and the experiences of daily life (Van Manen 2014). More specifically, a descriptive phenomenological research design was utilised. According to Vagle (2014), descriptive phenomenology involves three elements, namely obtaining the description of the phenomenon from others; bracketing; and pursuing an invariant psychological meaning. In this research, single mothers used their own words to express their experiences regarding raising their adolescent sons. The author who conducted the interviews and performed the data analysis applied bracketing, and meaning was given to experiences of the mentioned single mothers by developing themes, among other things. Bracketing refers to the process whereby the researcher excludes assumptions, prejudices, and past knowledge regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Giorgi 2009; Connelly 2010). In this study, the first author had to apply bracketing, as she raised an adolescent boy as a black single mother. She is of the opinion that she had to sacrifice a great deal for her children, sometimes with little appreciation from them. This author feels that it was not easy to raise her daughters either, but she could relate with them because she was once a girl too, unlike an adolescent boy, whom she could not relate to entirely. In many instances, the first author found it difficult to understand her adolescent boy and feels that the presence of a husband/father could have helped to understand the psychosocial needs of her adolescent boy better. It was very difficult for the first author when her adolescent son had to go to initiation school, because she could not understand it from a female point of view. She resorted to prayer for comfort and guidance, as she did not have any experience of this part of masculine culture. Her brother, who could have looked after her adolescent boy, as he had gone through the same experience, was not available. The first author was solely dependent on one of the male teachers of the academic school her adolescent boy attended. The male teacher had assured her that her adolescent boy was doing well. She kept her faith, and she was a very proud mother when

her adolescent boy indeed returned safely as a man from the initiation school. For this, she could not thank God enough. As a mother, the first author holds the opinion that boys look up to their fathers as their role models and that daughters look up to their mothers as role models. Having experienced a challenge in raising an adolescent boy without the presence of his father brought about this investigation to find out from other single mothers regarding their experiences in performing this task.

Purposive sampling was used, because research participants were selected for a specific purpose (Lombard 2016). In this study, participants were selected with the aim to explore their experiences as single mothers who are raising adolescent boys. Three single mothers raising adolescent boys were sampled: a single mother who never got married, a widower, and a divorced single mother. Semi-structured interviews were conducted according to an interview schedule to gather the data. This form of data collection is employed when the research participants have profound knowledge of the subject under investigation (Engelbrecht 2016). The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Data were analysed according to the principles of descriptive phenomenology according to Giorgi (2009). A second round of interviews was held to reach information saturation. On one occasion, the first author had to stop the interview and advise the research participant to attend counselling, as she became very emotional when discussing her experiences of raising her adolescent boy.

Several ethical principles according to Strydom (2011) were taken into consideration in the execution of this research project. With regard to informed consent, the research participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the research, as well as their right to withdraw from participation at any stage during interviews. As a result, the research participants were not deceived. Participants were also informed that they would not be compensated for taking part in this study. Participation in this study was voluntary and no participant was forced and/or coerced in any way to partake in the study. Harm to the participants was also avoided by the first author, who conducted the interviews, being sensitive towards the emotions of the participants. As indicated above one interview had to be ended when the author sensed that a partic-

ipant became emotional when sharing her experiences. Confidentiality was maintained by not attaching the names and any other identifying particulars of the research participants to the transcribed research data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the transcribed interviews was performed using the phenomenological principles as explained in the methodological section above. The following themes were identified based on the analysis.

Unemployment and Financial Challenges

A black single mother stated: *I am unemployed; as a result, sometime we have no food to eat. I worry a lot about my boy because he will end up leaving school early in order to take care of us.* It goes without saying that black single mothers experiencing unemployment cannot provide for the basic needs of their families, even with the assistance of governmental social grants as explained by another black single mother: *I am unemployed, I have to buy food and clothing for the kids, and I also have to pay the school fees. I just do not afford. The government grant does not help either, as it is not enough.* These circumstances can thus force an adolescent boy to leave school to try and provide for his family. Black single mothers could also be placed in a position to accept poorly paid jobs (Mkhize and Msomi 2016). Thereby, the income gap between single mothers and single fathers is maintained (Kramer et al. 2016), sustaining a poverty-cycle for single mothers.

Physical and Mental Health Issues

Single motherhood may have negative impact on one's physical health, as shown in the following statement: *It was better before their father deserted me. Now the burden is too much for me. As a result, I am most of the time sick. I am visiting a clinic regularly.* The findings of an American study validate that, among other things, the physical health of single mothers is affected. The physical health of single mothers is rated as fair to poor (Ifcher and Zarghamee 2014). Overall, it seems that the demographic characteristics of single mothers, for example, unemployment or low income, poor education, and race, have a negative impact on their health.

Some of the participants experienced mental health issues as well: *I spend most of the time at tavern and drink a lot to forget about all my problems. But that does not help me, as I will be sober and start to drink a lot again because my adolescent boy is putting me through lot of problems. I would be called to school often because he fought with his school mates and when I suggest counselling he does not want to listen. All of these affect my health.* Alcohol abuse can mask anxiety and depression. Therefore, one should be careful to assess alcohol abuse on face value, as it may mask underlying mental health challenges. Broussard (2010) confirms that there is a higher incidence of substance abuse and mental health challenges among single mothers than among mothers with a partner. The question arises how a black single mother can take emotionally care of her adolescent son if she experiences physical and mental health issues.

Increased Parenting Responsibilities

Broussard (2010) identifies parenting as a stressor for single mothers. Robinson and Werblow (2013) note that single mothers play a crucial role in their sons' future success. This notion places a heavy responsibility on the already financially and psychosocially burdened black single mother as indicated below.

Feelings of Guilt

According to Radloff (as cited in Atkins 2017), feelings of guilt can be an indication of depression. This is evidenced by the statement of one of the participants: *Sometimes I feel guilty about my decision of having to let go of his dad, maybe he would understand him better than I do.* As guilt feelings can mask depression, similar to substance abuse, it is important that black single mothers be scanned for depression when they receive social services. In this way, they can receive a holistic social intervention.

Decision-making

One participant stated: *The father should have the best interest of his son at heart and stop neglecting the adolescent boy because of our own mistakes. If decisions need to be made concerning the boy, the involvement of the fa-*

ther is vital. This desire of single mothers to have the father play a role in decision-making regarding the upbringing of their son is confirmed by Lindegger and Maxwell (cited in Bojuwoye and Sylvester 2012). Decision-making is an additional responsibility that the black single mother must bear alone.

Sacrificing Personal Needs

The following statement seems to be in contrast with findings of Berridge and Romich (2011) who concluded that single mothers deescalate some of their household duties to their adolescent boys as a way to cope with all her household responsibilities. *I try to put the needs of my boy first before mine, but it seems that my boy doesn't notice my efforts. I always want to satisfy his needs by giving him what he is asking. I don't want him to always think that if his father was still at home things wouldn't be difficult.*

Fear for the Safety of the Adolescent Boy

One participant mentioned: *Young boys are dying like flies in our area, as crime like house-breaking, stealing and robbery is always taking place around us; gunshots and drugs are rife.* Bojuwoye and Sylvester (2012) explain that adolescent boys perceive the father as protector. According to Vargas et al. (2016), it has to be taken into account that research findings differ regarding the impact of the absent father on the male child.

A Lack of Understanding of the Developmental Stage of the Adolescent Boy

One participant mentioned: *It is overwhelming to raise a boy in the absence of his father as one does not understand them. It's easy to relate with girls because I was once a girl.* It is deduced that this experience of single mothers raising adolescent boys is typical, as Bojuwoye and Sylvester (2012) also found that single mothers feel less comfortable raising adolescent boys because of gender socialisation matters.

Culture and Motherhood

Although males have the legal right to refuse circumcision, they are culturally pressured to undergo this ritual (Ntozini and Ngqangweni 2016). By virtue of being females, black mothers (single or married) are not acquainted with the

proceedings of initiation schools. As one participant stated: *In our culture when the boys are becoming young men, they should attend initiation school. It is difficult when the father is not there for his son as culture doesn't allow us to intervene on the basis that I am a woman. Not only that, this tradition requires a lot of money, which should be a shared responsibility. It's frustrating.* Venter (2013) affirms that black mothers have no say when it comes to the cultural practice of sending adolescent males to an initiation school. Females are not allowed to be involved in male initiation practices. Therefore, black single mothers have to rely on male family members to update them about the well-being of their sons. However, as one participant explained, *sometimes the update does not happen at all because by virtue of being women, I don't have to know what is happening in the initiation schools, let alone having to be informed about the progress of my own son.* Black mothers have to wait till the boys are finished with the initiation school process to find out how they are doing and whether they went through the process unharmed (Venter 2013).

This can be a stressful period for black single mothers because, according to Morei (2017), many boys die when circumcision (one of the practices taking place at an initiation school) goes wrong. Although it is an accepted cultural practice that females are not involved, it can also be interpreted from a feministic perspective as the marginalising of females, especially black single mothers, by patriarchal society.

Disciplining the Adolescent Boy

Disciplining an adolescent boy can be a serious challenge for black single mothers, especially when the boy comes back from the initiation school and regards himself to be a man (Mohlaloka et al. 2016). A higher tendency of behavioural challenges exists in boys in the absence of a father figure (Richter and Lemola 2017). As one participant explained: *To be a disciplinarian to my adolescent boy is very overwhelming. Sometimes I will discipline him for a wrongdoing, only for him to repeat the same act again. I also talk to him but it just seems impossible for him to listen. I wish his father was around as I believe that children learn through modelling.* The permutation of some of the consequences of attending an initiation school and the higher tendency for the development of behavioural for boys growing up without a father figure can

make the upbringing and disciplining of the adolescent boy extremely difficult for the black single mother.

Support

The black single mothers indicated that they receive support from their extended families. A black single mother explained it as follows: *The extended family members do offer help sometimes to look after the children while I'm at work, but I don't want them to feel as if I'm shifting my responsibilities.* Black single mothers do not receive assistance on a micro level (family members) only but should also receive support on a macro level (governmental support) as well. They experience the legal system as less helpful and a participant explained this challenge as follows: *I tried several times to go to court in order for my former partner to help with the support of our boy with no success. When it's time for us to appear in court, my former partner does not show up. The court then gives me another date, but the situation keeps repeating itself.* However, social work assistance is available for black single mothers: *I was helped by the social worker to apply for the grant after my adolescent boy was caught stealing food of his classmate.* It is evident that single mothers raising adolescent boys need support on a micro-, a meso-, and a macro-level. Mkhize and Msomi (2016) also indicate that single mothers need support regarding psychosocial and economic challenges. Social workers play a variety of professional roles (Qalinge 2015) and in their roles of counsellor, broker, mobiliser and coordinator they can play a vital role in supporting single mothers.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This was a small qualitative study. It is a major drawback as the findings cannot be generalised to the population of black single mothers raising adolescent boys. Furthermore, the findings based on this small sample will most probably not influence policy on a macro level.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the black mothers raising adolescent boys focus their bio-psychosocial energy on surviving physically and taking care of their children. They have to fight depression, emotional distress and

health-related issues, which takes place in the context of financially impoverished communities. Even when single mothers have the opportunity to get work, they still struggle financially, because men earn a higher income. Because of this daily struggle, it seemed as if the single mothers did not have the time and energy to spend on self-actualisation. However, spirituality is deemed as a survival coping mechanism.

Parenting in itself is another major challenge for single mothers raising adolescent boys. According to tradition and patriarchy, mothers are nurturers and caregivers. Because of this tradition the single mothers do not function from a feminist stance. Therefore, they are of the belief that they need males (fathers) to effectively raise their adolescent boys. These perceptions of the single mothers raising adolescent boys, thus, maintain the status quo.

Mothers cannot depend only on the social support they get from families and friends, because this support does not seem to be consistent. Non-governmental organisations and governmental departments such as the Departments of Health, Basic Education and Social Development should be sensitised towards the needs of single mothers in order to render effective social services that address their bio-psychosocial-spiritual and economic challenges.

The most important contribution of this paper is probably the identification of unspoken narratives. Firstly, the experiences of the black single mothers regarding their bio-psychosocial-spiritual and economic sufferings give lie to the notion of an equal, free and democratic South African society. Secondly, on face value, it seemed as if these black single mothers had developed an unprotesting spirit, and that they accepted the patriarchal community with its male-dominated cultural prescriptions as it is; thus, the penis still rules society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It seems vital that single mothers raising adolescent boys receive social services by means of social development programs to address their bio-psychosocial-spiritual and economic needs. It is suggested that these social programs be embedded in the philosophy and principles of feminism so that the single mothers can develop self-reliance, and not be dependent on a male-oriented society. The social development programs, with regard to single mothers raising adolescent boys, should be socio-culturally, envi-

ronmentally and economically informed. This could be achieved by inviting these single mothers to participate actively as equal partners in creating these social development programs.

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