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Full Length Article

Young families become mindful of their possibilities through the appreciation of their family life



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ABSTRACT

Young families, as viewed through a multi-generational lens, provide the environment in which children can be nurtured and socialised. The purpose of the research is to explore and describe how the parents and grandparents of young families appreciate their family life. A qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual multiple case study design was used to conduct the study. Purposive sampling methods were applied to select families according to the sampling criteria, each family representing an individual case study. Appreciative inquiry interviews were conducted with the young parents and available grandparents, during which the participants were asked four open-ended questions. Data collection was enriched by means of reflective letters to participants, collages created by the young parents, and the researcher's field notes and journal inscriptions. The data collected from each individual case study was analysed and then synthesised by means of a cross-case analysis. A cross-case validation report was compiled. The themes and categories that emerged from the data were discussed. The research study concluded that when young families embarked on a journey of discovering their strengths and potential in the larger family system, they creatively envision and discovered the possibilities to transform their destiny in a purposeful and constructive way.

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1. Introduction and background

Young families are the nurturers of the next generation who need a strong foundation in order to become conscious leaders of the future. The family, as the core institution for child-rearing worldwide, plays a fundamental role in the development of healthy individuals in every community

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(*Child Trends*, 2014:3). The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social welfare (WHO, 2006:1). This holistic approach to health is essential for establishing a healthy society by promoting the health of individuals and families. The primary role of the family is that of socialisation of the children, by which means cultural norms and values are transferred to the next generation (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013:4). The healthy development of a child in a harmonious family environment is of fundamental importance to the mental health of the family as a whole, bringing about a positive effect on communities and society overall (Centre on the Developing Child, 2013:1; Fahey, Keilthy, & Polek, 2012:1; Holborn & Eddy, 2011:1).

Globally family life has undergone many changes over the last few decades, influenced by various social and economic factors (*Child Trends*, 2014:4). Even though the structure, functioning and processes of families have changed over time, the family has nevertheless survived as the core unit of nurturing (Kaakinen & Hanson, 2015:3). In South Africa, many children are reared in families comprising different and complex family compositions due to factors such as poverty, divorce, violence, unemployment, death and diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Holborn and Eddy (2011:1) confirm the effect of socio-economic challenges on family life in the South African context, leading to complex family compositions such as grandmothers living with grandchildren, single parent families and child-headed families. Even though there has been a decline in the prevalence of the nuclear family structure as basic unit, it still comprises about one third of the South African family composition (*Statistics South Africa*, 2012:7). Marriage as an institution in South Africa is on the decline, making room for cohabitation and other living arrangements. The significance of the extended family's value has also been at stake globally as well as in South Africa, which has left young families more vulnerable. Gaibie (2012:1) confirms this concern regarding South African families and emphasises the significant role that grandparents and other family members' support plays a in maintaining the mental health of the family.

Many research studies have been done on what goes wrong in families, the many challenges that families encounter due to relationship problems, modern disease, trauma and environmental influences. As researcher I observed that research studies done in the past five years on the positive aspects of family mental health were roughly less than one tenth of all the research articles I searched for that focus on families. With this research, the focus is turned away from a problem-oriented perspective to an inquiry into what works well and the strengths and potential that uphold young families. Greeff (2013:274) confirms a recent shift in paradigm among family mental health researchers who are increasingly turning away from a pathological focus to a strength-based perspective.

1.1. Problem statement

When a young couple falls in love and decide to be together and raise a family, they have dreams and high expectations for themselves as a couple and for their future family life. Marriage ceremonies and other cultural celebrations surrounding marriage confirm and strengthen these expectations

from friends and family. Becoming parents enters them into a period of continuous family transition from conception onward through pregnancy, birth, early childhood, the teenage stage, adolescence and adulthood. This is an irreversible process that brings about emotional, spiritual, physical and mental changes for the couple and that leads to new experiences and growth for the young couple and collectively for the family (Cowan & Cowan, 2012:432).

The responsibility of raising a family in modern-day life can pose a huge challenge to young parents. The fast pace of life due to the digital and industrial explosions of the last two decades has brought about enormous changes in communication and interaction within the family as well as challenges for parents to mediate Internet and social media use in their families. Young parents may find it overwhelmingly challenging to raise a family and to support themselves financially. In most cases, both parents have to work long hours and find ways to balance their work responsibilities with family-care demands (Haddock, Zimmerman, Lyness, & Ziemba, 2006:207). Relationships may become demanding and divorce may perhaps be seen as the only solution, leading to disruption and a negative impact on the mental health of the young couple and their children. The divorce rate in South Africa is on the increase, with the most vulnerable group being young couples with young children (*Statistics South Africa*, 2013:6). The challenges that the young family faces also affect the grandparents. It seems as though the young families that start to lose hope for their family unity have also lost sight of the dreams they once envisioned for themselves. It might be that their dreams got lost in the changing reality of their everyday lives and that the couple's awareness of who they wanted to be faded or never realised.

Young families need guidance on becoming more conscious of how they could keep their families intact, nurturing their relationships, appreciating their strengths and still dreaming and envisioning a future for their families that is attainable.

1.2. Aim of the study

The aim of this research study was to explore and describe how young families appreciate their family life.

1.3. Definition of key concepts

1.3.1. Young family

For the purpose of this study, a young family is described as a heterosexual couple with one or more young children, married or living together for 10 years or less. The young family is viewed from a multi-generational perspective, as part of a bigger family system that includes grandparents or other significant family members who engage with the young family on a daily basis. All family members are seen as whole persons with the dimensions of body, mind and spirit who are functioning in an integrated, interactive manner with their environment (*University of Johannesburg*, 2012:5). Young families also refer to young couples and young parents in this study.

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