

Research brief

Zulu grandmothers' socialization of granddaughters

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Abstract

Qualitative exploratory research among Zulu grandmothers and granddaughters was carried out in 1995 in KwaZulu-Natal. Preliminary analysis of data from interviews and participant observation is briefly reported here. This analysis suggests that older women continue to have important roles in Zulu families, including teaching granddaughters about work and respectful behaviour. At the same time, there are tensions and stresses between the generations and between Zulu ideas about women's roles and transformations of women's roles in contemporary South Africa. Interviewees' perceptions of critical junctures of these interpersonal and sociocultural tensions focussed on premarital sexual behaviour and pregnancies, respect between the generations, and education and its effects on the roles of Zulu women (and more broadly, gender relations), and women's possibilities for success in the formal economy and modern world. Aware of these tensions and problems, grandmothers are not giving up their mission to socialize granddaughters into Zulu culture, even when there are failures such as a granddaughter's falling pregnant. At the same time, they are looking for ways to enhance their granddaughters' life chances through formal education.

Introduction

My ongoing long-term research in Kenya since 1982 has focussed on the effects of modernization and social change on Kenyan families and intergenerational relationships, including the roles of grandmothers in socializing granddaughters (Cattell, 1989, 1994). An opportunity to conduct a research project in KwaZulu-Natal thus led me to a comparative study among Zulus.

In the literature on African families, grandparents are often mentioned in regard to their roles as educators of their grandchildren. Marianne Brindley (1982) provided an extensive description of the complex roles of older women in Zulu society in research carried out nearly 20 years ago (see also Krige, 1936; Vilakazi, 1962). These accounts portray grandmothers as important socializers of their granddaughters in the indigenous system of *infundiso*, or the socializing of children into Zulu culture so they become adult human beings (Vilakazi, 1962). Grandmothers were also primarily responsible for controlling girls' sexual behaviour (Brindley, 1982). In recent decades family roles and intergenerational relationships have been heavily influenced by urbanization (Campbell, 1994; Møller, 1993) and the deep unrest of the 1980s

which led some youth to reject the authority of older generations (Everatt & Orkin, 1994).

In order to make a broader comparison with my Kenyan research findings (Cattell, 1989, 1994), I would like to have fully investigated the ways in which Zulu grandmother/granddaughter relationships have changed with urbanization, the expansion of formal education, and the economic and sociopolitical transformations of late twentieth century South Africa. However, the project dealt primarily with issues relating to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and Zulu grandmothers' socialization of granddaughters in contemporary settings. Because the research period was short and South Africa was new for me, it was exploratory in nature. In particular, the nature of the research process (primarily structured interviews and focus groups) tended to elicit normative responses – norms, ideals and attitudes – rather than case studies of actual behaviour. This paper constitutes a preliminary report following initial analysis of interview data.¹

The research: methods and sample

I was in South Africa for ten days in July 1995 and then for a three-month period from late September through December 1995, and was affiliated to the Centre for Social and Development Studies (CSDS) at the University of Natal (Durban).

The research consisted of open-ended survey interviews, in-depth interviews and a few days of participant observation in a rural area. Interviews were conducted in Zulu by Dudu Khanyile and Ayanda Sotshongaye, who then translated them into English. Dudu Khanyile's translations were transcribed by me in a co-operative process involving many discussions about the meanings and implications of interviewees' responses.²

Interviews were conducted with 25 women at pension payout points and with six women in Tugela Ferry. Other interviews were conducted in individuals' homes in Umlazi township and Stanger and in the deep-rural area of eMakhabeleni near Kranskop. Eight women (four rural, four urban) provided in-depth biographical information. Focus group interviews with grandmothers were conducted in Inanda township (one group with 10 participants) and in eMakhabeleni (11 participants). Eight rural and three urban granddaughters were interviewed. The total number of interviewees included 60 grandmothers and 11 granddaughters.

Some grandmothers were in their forties or fifties, others were in their sixties or seventies, and some did not know their ages. Many of the older women were widows and pensioners.

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Interviewees in rural areas slightly outnumbered urban interviewees; however, the rural bias was probably even stronger than numbers make it seem, if the older urban women were migrants from rural areas, as was the case with the four in-depth urban interviewees (this information was not collected from other urban interviewees).

Finally, Dudu Khanyile and I spent five days in the home of Chief Dlomo of eMakhabeleni, which included an afternoon's visit in the home of the Chief's *induna*, Mr Jali. This brief period was valuable for bringing to life material from urban interviews and my reading about Zulu life (Berglund, 1989; Brindley, 1982; Krige, 1936; Ngubane, 1977; Vilakazi, 1962). However, it did not allow for the collection of much information on actual behavioural patterns which would have greatly enriched the interview material on norms, values and attitudes.

Grandmothers and Zulu culture: work and respect

Most grandmothers saw themselves as important in their families and communities as family builders, peacekeepers, problem solvers, promoters of harmony and respect, and teachers of the young, particularly granddaughters. (Boys, they said, being boys, must learn from their grandfathers.) These women saw themselves as culture-bearers of *isiZulu esidala* (old Zulu things, Zulu culture) in a world which threatens the continuity of their beliefs and customs. As one Inanda grandmother said: "If grandmothers are in the community there is dignity [*esihunzi*] in the community. If the grandmothers are no more, things become easy and children become loose." Granddaughters' views of their grandmothers reinforced the grandmothers' self-images. Many granddaughters particularly mentioned their grandmothers' importance in maintaining peace and harmony in the home.

As described by both grandmothers and granddaughters, much grandmother teaching concerned either work or respect (*hlonipha*), the overarching principle in Zulu interpersonal relationships. Many grandmothers said: "Respect is the first thing." But many grandmothers and granddaughters alike felt work and respect were equally important.

As is common throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the world of work among Zulus is sharply divided by gender. Grandmothers were concerned that their granddaughters learn all the female skills involved in running a house and (in rural areas) farming: how to cook, carry water, make mats, do beadwork, and do all other work. They said this was what they taught their granddaughters, and granddaughters, both urban and rural, credited grandmothers with having taught them these skills.

Respect, *hlonipha*, involves elements of both the authority of elders and elders' knowledge and advice which should be given to and accepted by juniors (Campbell, 1994). *Hlonipha* is valued in all relationships but is particularly expected from girls and women. In general, those who have respect will greet everyone they meet, speak softly, not look elders in the eye, be obedient, do errands promptly, and – if you are a girl – "come home on time" and "not walk up and down." *Hlonipha* also involves a behavioural code for females of avoidance behaviours and extreme deference toward males, e.g. kneeling (Brindley, 1982). In the rural areas I visited (Msinga and Kranskop) there was widespread observance of such *hlonipha* customs as wearing hats, cloaks and towels which are considered respectful attire for married women, or having bare breasts if unmarried. I saw none of this in Durban. In addition, several times I saw the Chief's wife or daughters kneel before him, and his wife did not sit on a chair in his presence.

In the Zulu social system girls who had menstruated but were not yet married were incorporated into a hierarchy of

their own: *amatshitshi* (girls who have menstruated), *amaqhikiza* (girls with lovers) and *izinkheli* (girls whose bridewealth has been partly paid). The girls regulated much of their own behaviour and were responsible for each other, particularly regarding courtship. But they were overseen by grandmothers, who advised them and did virginity checks, which could occur anywhere, even in public. In the in-depth interviews grandmothers recalled their own experiences of courtship and sex education which followed this pattern. They also lamented that things have changed in today's world and that "today's girls no longer respect themselves," i.e. they do not guard their virginity. And too many girls fall pregnant before they marry.

Grandmothers complained of various problems: some youth do not respect us, children are hiding things from us, the young do not greet people, boys and girls walk around holding hands, there is too much violence in families and in our communities, some young people are disobedient and wilful. As one urban grandmother said: "Grandchildren of nowadays just do what they want. If you talk to them they say, 'Oh, you're talking in old-fashioned language'." Their deepest concerns, however, centred on sexual behaviour and premarital pregnancies. Zulus have adapted their customs to cope with these pregnancies in ways which are protective of both young mothers and their children (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992). However, grandmothers who themselves grew up in the old Zulu system may feel that such pregnancies represent a failure in themselves, in that grandmothers in Zulu society were responsible for granddaughters' sexual behaviour and maintenance of virginity until marriage.

Ambiguous attitudes toward education

Work and respect, Zulu style, were what most grandmothers knew and were able to teach. But they also wanted their granddaughters to go to school even though they might come back with a "big stomach" (pregnant).

Among Zulus, success involves being a proper person (*umuntu*) who is hard-working and respectful. For girls, respect includes remaining a virgin until marriage. Success in the modern world is associated with formal education and employment. The content of information and the nature of work and personal behaviour differ greatly between these two worlds. Both grandmothers and granddaughters were sensitive to these tensions and often discussed them in terms of girls' "falling pregnant" before marriage, especially if they become educated. Grandmothers explicitly linked education with a lack of respect and disruption of the Zulu way. Nevertheless, most grandmothers wanted granddaughters to go to school – because they also linked education with employment, money and independence. Some said that they helped with granddaughters' school expenses out of their pension money.

Grandmothers were ambiguous about education. They wanted girls to know and do women's work and be respectful in the Zulu way. But they also wanted granddaughters to go to school "even up to university – oh, then I could be happy." Some articulated even more radical visions, such as the rural grandmother who told us that if her granddaughter goes to university, "She will be independent, she won't beg anyone for anything. She will be a man herself. And I myself will know that I have a second son."

The moral imperative of generational continuity

Many grandmothers expressed a strong sense of generational continuity, of passing knowledge down the generations, and of the value of their knowledge to the development of younger

generations, particularly granddaughters – even when the granddaughters ignored the teaching by falling pregnant.

Asked “Why teach girls the Zulu customs when they may just ignore what you taught them?” one grandmother said: “A grandmother is bread to her grandchild because the grandmother is feeding the child with all that the grandmother gathered from her grandmother.” Another grandmother spoke of the importance of knowing Zulu customs: “Grandmothers and grandfathers know all the customs [*amasiko*]. They are the people who are teaching these young ones the Zulu customs so they do not get lost from them.”

Many grandmothers expressed a similar sense of generational continuity and even moral imperative in conveying knowledge and customs learned from their grandmothers. As an urban grandmother said, “It’s *unembeza* [conscience or guiding principle] that I learned from my grandmother which drives me to do that ... We are still introducing the old style of teaching that nowadays children do not like to go for. This is how we were brought up.”

But why persist if the children do not “go for it?” “Because customs build up a person [*umuntu*]. If a granddaughter knows a custom, she will know how to respect herself. She will not do things that are too much for her.” “A grandmother,” said another, “is bread to her grandchildren. We are giving our granddaughters provision for tomorrow.” And another: “My advices are my grandchildren’s future.” Still another grandmother said: “I teach them even if they do not follow my teachings. Perhaps their children will remember.”

Summing up

From this preliminary data analysis it appears that older Zulu women continue to have important roles in their families, like Chief Dlomo’s 65-year-old mother who was obviously a key figure in her family. In the interviews and focus groups, grandmothers expressed a sense of special mission in teaching granddaughters about work and personal behaviour based on Zulu ideas of respect. Rural granddaughters confirmed that they had indeed learned about work and respect from their grandmothers.

Realistically, there are strains in the relationships of Zulu grandmothers and granddaughters – but this is to be expected, intergenerational conflict is found everywhere (Foner, 1984). Grandmothers seem to feel particularly keenly a sense of failure when granddaughters fall pregnant, and families are likely to experience great tensions when this happens. Grandmothers are also aware of broader scale tensions between *imfundiso*, the indigenous Zulu way of socializing children and “building up a person (*umuntu*)” (where grandmothers have important roles) and *imfuno*, the formal educational system of the non-Zulu world (in which many grandmothers have no part). However, grandmothers are not giving up on the Zulu side of “building up” their granddaughters, and at the same time, they are advocates for their granddaughters’ school education and practical implementers of it as well.

Hopefully, further analysis of the data from this research, especially the eight biographical interviews, will reveal more details of contemporary grandmother-granddaughter relationships and how grandmothers are coping with social change and modern social problems than this research brief can provide.

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Notes

1. Sections of this paper were presented at a seminar entitled “Talking to the elders: Zulu grandmothers and granddaughters in a changing world.” given at the University of Natal (Durban) and co-sponsored by the Centre for Social and Development Studies (CSDS) and the South African Gerontological Association (KwaZulu-Natal branch) on 30 November 1995.
2. The tapes and interview transcripts are archived at CSDS at the University of Natal (Durban).

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