

# Intergenerational conflict in township families: transforming notions of "respect" and changing power relations

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## Abstract

*In-depth interviews with 64 Durban township residents representing several generations highlighted intergenerational conflict as a feature of working-class township family life. Informants related this problem to the changing face of "traditional" notions of respect for the older generation within families, according to which youth should (i) show deference and obedience towards members of the older generation, and (ii) regard them as valuable social guides. Members of the older generation (aged between 50 and 60 years), particularly men, tended to dwell on the former component of respect, referring to the younger generation's failure to treat them with the deference and obedience which they felt was their due. The youth in the study (aged between 17 and 23 years) dwelt on the latter component, with many suggesting that their elders were not always qualified to guide them in facing the challenges of modern township life. It is argued that while intergenerational relations are currently in turmoil, this does not indicate a "breakdown" of township family relations. The family appears to remain a resilient institution. Further, the severity of current intergenerational problems is related to particular features of the present historical moment in South Africa, characterized by rapid social change. It is concluded that the severity of the problem could decrease as members of the present younger generation come to take their places as parents and grandparents.*

## Introduction

Intergenerational conflict emerged as a key feature of township family life in interviews with working-class black Zulu-speaking township residents which investigated the effects of social change on family life and the changing role of the family in the socialization of youth. Members of the older generation (aged between 50 and 60 years) who were interviewed often complained that they had no control over young people. They repeatedly referred to a breakdown of intergenerational respect, which they regarded as a pillar of traditional African social relations. Many members of the older generation said that they lacked confidence when trying to advise their children in a world that was changing at an alarming pace. Elders' responses to this situation varied from bewilderment to anger to fear.

The responses of members of the younger generation (aged between 17 and 23 years) to their elders varied. The majority said that it was important to respect adults; however their

notion of respect was more conditional than many parents might have felt was their due. Some youths despised their parents for their old-fashioned views and were dismissive of parental advice.

Intergenerational problems are part of every society. As an informant, Mr T,<sup>1</sup> commented: "From the primitive days, there have been changes between elderly people and the young. Youth take over from the adults, and the adults don't like it." All the respondents agreed that the problem had become particularly acute since the early 1980s. The unusually rapid pace of social change in South Africa and the associated social instability make intergenerational conflict particularly intense amongst working-class township families at this time. Further, the form of intergenerational conflict in South Africa is closely tied to the wider economic and political context of family life.

## The interviews

This paper draws on two research projects, both which used interviews to collect information from residents of Umlazi township in Durban. The first project was the pilot study of the Natal Family Project, conducted in 1988 under the auspices of the Organization for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSSA). It focussed on the psychological and social effects of apartheid and capitalism on township family life. This project involved detailed unstructured interviews with 22 members of five township families. Intergenerational conflict emerged as a key issue. Informants linked the problem to a decline of parental authority within families, with youth often turning to competing social groupings and institutions (e.g. peer groups, political groupings and the school) for advice and guidance. A second follow-up project, conducted in 1990-91, focussed on the changing role of the family as an agent of socialization of youth. This project involved open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 42 men and women aged between 17 and 23 years. It investigated the role played by group memberships such as the family, the peer group, the church and political groupings in the development of youth identity.

In both studies information was collected during personal interviews, conducted by the author and Zulu-speaking co-interviewers. All the older informants had been born in rural areas; they had mainly come to the urban area when they reached working age. In this paper this group is referred to as

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the "older generation." All of these informants were also grandparents.

The women and men referred to in this paper as the "younger generation," or "the youth" had all been born and raised in Umlazi.

Drawing on data from both sets of interviews, intergenerational conflict is characterized in terms of three closely related features:

- Transforming notions of respect within families;
- youths' assessment of the older generation's qualifications to act as social guides; and
- the changing role of fathers (and to a limited extent mothers) within the family.

The notion of "tradition" was a key reference point in the informants' accounts of intergenerational relationships. In referring to "tradition," the informants of the older generation recalled an idyllic rural past, where families were economically self-sufficient, lived comfortably off the land, social relations were rigidly ordered and hierarchical, and young people obeyed their elders. However so-called traditional social relations may not always be accurate reflections of the past and may often represent mythical reconstructions which serve a variety of functions. For example, Campbell (1990) comments that a notion of tradition is sometimes drawn on by dominant social groupings (e.g. men) to justify claims to power over subordinate social groupings (e.g. women). In the context of this paper, the main function of tradition in people's accounts of their lives was to justify the older generation's claims to authority over the younger generation.

#### *Transforming notions of respect*

Informants cited respect as a cornerstone of traditional African social relationships, particularly respect within the family. Implicit in the interview data was a notion of respect for older people which prescribed acceptance of the following two intermeshed guidelines for young people:

- (1) Young people should recognize the authority of their elders and betters, and show obedience and deference to them at all times. The older generation is unconditionally deserving of such obedience and deference by virtue of age.
- (2) Older people serve as valuable social guides for the young; parents have knowledge and expertise about the world that is a useful resource for guiding their children. Younger people should take the advice of older people because of their superior wisdom.

The first aspect of respect described above formed the focus of the older generation's attention. The respondents in this group often referred to the disobedience of youths and a failure to treat their elders with the deference which they deserved. The older generation regarded respect as its unconditional traditional right. Many regarded the erosion of traditional ways with a combination of anger and distress.

*It is not like our days when we respected grown-up people. These days children just go their own way – I don't know where they get it from. We respected every grown-up person as our own parent. These children are not like us . . . Previous ways are disappearing in our places but I feel very sorry to see that happening because each and every nation is identified with its traditions. The result of leaving ours is that we are nowhere, we lose our dignity . . . As a respectful and powerful nation we are eroded altogether. What is left is that we are a nation with no identity. (Mr B)*

For older informants, such as Mr A below, respect between generations was a non-negotiable aspect of his very humanity.

*The most important thing is to know each other well, without fears, and to respect each other. These are the cornerstones of our life. Losing these we don't need to regard ourselves as human beings. (Mr A)*

Youth on the other hand often had little time for tradition. An older woman commented as follows:

*The children of today are only interested in progress and material gains, and they see traditions as a stumbling block . . . They believe that some of these beliefs are intended to put them backwards . . . Books and education are on their side. They always quote from books and most of these activities and beliefs have been proved wrong through books. They say that if they believe in these traditions they will never succeed. (Mrs D)*

During the interviews, youths did not dwell on the first component of respect relating to obedience and deference towards one's elders. In general, they spoke extremely positively of their parents, with admiration and often awe at their parents' demonstrations of strength and resilience in the face of obstacles to the daily survival of working-class families. They often spoke with great sensitivity of the sacrifices that their parents had made for them. Several young people singled out their mothers in this regard, expressing gratitude for their ongoing struggle to hold their family together under conditions of extreme poverty, political instability and violence.

*My mother is my hero . . . all that she has struggled for has been only for us [her children] . . . She has had a difficult time and even now she is not free because there are so many difficulties. (M8)<sup>2</sup>*

In speaking of intergenerational relations young people tended most often to focus on the second component of respect, i.e. a view of members of the older generation as valuable social guides. In many cases they did not regard elders as such, citing a range of reasons why their parents' tried and tested life skills were inadequate guidelines for their own lives. According to many of the young people interviewed, their failure to respect their elders in the second sense of the word was due not to wilful defiance or bloody-minded disobedience (as implied by many elders, particularly men), but rather to a more considered belief that the behavioural guidelines which their parents sought to teach them were inappropriate for the demands of modern social life.

#### **Youth debating the older generation's adequacy as social guides**

In many societies there is enough continuity between the experiences of succeeding generations for the accumulated wisdom and experience of the older generation to have a significant bearing on the lives of the youth. In South African township families of the late 20th century however, many members of the older generation feel that social change is proceeding at such a rate that youth are faced with situations of which they, as parents, have little experience themselves. As a result, they feel ill-equipped to advise their children, and experience a strong sense of inadequacy and a lack of confidence. Many children reinforce this view, believing that their parents, being uneducated, are ignorant and have little of value to teach them.

*If you engage in discussion with older people you find that they are quite narrow in their thinking – they only*

*see one side of the argument and are not interested in other sides, and their arguments are quite boring compared to those of boys my age.* (M18)

*At one stage I was very negative towards father, but later I realised that he is very ignorant, and that nothing can be done about this.* (M13)

During interviews, younger informants devoted much attention to debating their parents' qualifications as social guides in the context of modern township life. On the one hand they expressed strong ties of love and loyalty to their parents, as well as a keen sense of appreciation of the ongoing sacrifices which their parents made for them.

*I think it is a bad thing for children who are educated to blame adults as a stupid lot – how can they blame people who saved money and lived a humble life in order to see their children educated only to be criticized as a reward?* (M17)

On the other hand young informants cited a number of reasons why the older generation was poorly qualified to guide them in meeting the demands of modern township life. The first of these reasons was their rural origins. Many youths made a sharp contrast between rural and urban people, referring to the relative lack of sophistication of rural people, who were often described as "in the dark" or "ignorant." A second reason was the older generation's relative lack of education. Most township youths are better educated than their parents. Educated people have more social status in township communities than uneducated people.

*If you are not educated, the community regards you as uncivilized.* (M2)

*If an educated person has some kind of social function and invites uneducated people amongst the guests, they tend to make the non-educated people feel separate and apart. The one crowd [the uneducated] will spend their evening in the tent outside, whereas the others [the educated] will spend their evening under a comfortable roof. The educated people will be served first, and will get everything in good time, whereas those who are outside will be attended to later.* (M6)

A third reason that militated against the older generation's reliability as social guides was their humble work status. The majority of the informants' parents and grandparents were, or had been labourers or domestic workers. Such work appeared not to be highly regarded by the youth, who tended to have upwardly mobile aspirations, structuring their identities around their dreams of educational advancement and good jobs.

Finally, several young informants dwelt at length on the older generation's lack of political consciousness. In the past 15 years or so, youth have been at the forefront of resistance to apartheid in South Africa. Young informants drew a sharp contrast between what they regarded as their elders' passive acceptance of racial discrimination and economic disadvantage, and their own active resistance to these phenomena.

Young informants' perceptions of the older generation's lack of political sophistication are examined below. Some of the more politicized informants referred scathingly to their elders' tolerance of their position at the bottom of the race and class hierarchy.

*The old people are scared of the white man. They see him as somebody like God they have never seen before. They never saw that what the white person said might have been wrong or right, bad or good. It didn't even occur to*

*them to question anything. The older generation has been prepared to accept everything the hardest way; they have had to struggle for everything they have got. But the young people don't wait for hard times. They are always active.* (M6)

The youths' insistence that the older generation might have had some power to fight against their social circumstances seems to be foreign to many older township dwellers. Several older informants articulated their deeply-ingrained sense of the powerlessness of black working-class people in comparison to the youths' changing perceptions.

*I grew up knowing very well that I was supposed to depend on the white person. When the children claim that we [black people] are the same as white people, I get confused, because I do not know how we can be equal to people who are our bosses.* (Mrs D)

The older generation's sense of subordination and powerlessness had often taken the form of an attitude of patience and passive endurance in the face of suffering. Mrs A referred to the fact that in her childhood the possibility of voicing protest against harsh working conditions on the white farm where her family had been tenant labourers for two generations was never considered. Farm labourers worked long and hard hours for no pay other than meagre rations and a right to live on a white farmer's land. A white farmer's power to evict families from the farm, leaving them homeless and destitute, kept the workers in a state of obedient fear.

*We often worked for months without being given time off even to go to church. We never complained because we knew our existence would be in danger. Even families who were not complaining could be evicted overnight. We understood those dangers and tried to prevent them as much as possible.* (Mrs A)

Such attitudes by older people often strongly contrasted with young informants' far more assertive attitudes to their rights. A young man described his conflict with his father, who had managed to organize an offer of employment for his son in the factory where he had worked all his life.

*I would rather be unemployed than go into my father's factory . . . there is no union protecting workers – and their working conditions are very bad as far as I know . . . seeing a lot of workers unprotected like that is a pain to me, and to be party to the acts of that factory will be very painful for me . . . My father is wasting his time if he thinks I will end up in that factory.* (M13)

Against this background of a general lack of faith in the viability of elders' world-views, many young people rely on competing socializing agents to guide them in their day-to-day lives. These include the peer group, political groupings and the school. Campbell (1992a, 1994) gives a detailed account of "competing" social groupings that provide the younger generation with alternative recipes for living to those of the family, more particularly their parents.

### **Declining status of fathers**

The interview data suggested that a complexity of social factors had led to a decline in power of adults in the family, particularly that of male adults. Historians have pointed out that the erosion of African patriarchy has been a long-established social process (Beinart, 1982). Some factors that have more recently intensified this process are considered below.

The socialization of African men is such that notions of hierarchical age and gender relations are strong and compell-

ing aspects of their sense of masculinity (Campbell, 1992b). African women on the other hand have never had much overt power. Intergenerational conflict is therefore often not as traumatic for them to negotiate, since they do not expect to command the same degree of respect and authority as do men.

Adult men have traditionally been the guardians of material wealth and resources within the community and the family. Now many working-class fathers are not able to provide for the most basic needs of their families. Regarding decision making, the views of older married men no longer hold undisputed sway. There is evidence of a decline in the centrality of their roles in shaping community opinion and decisions, particularly in the face of the catapulting of the younger generation to the forefront of township events. The declining power of fathers within families is examined, first on the economic front and second in relation to decision making.

#### *Decline in father's status: economic factors*

According to informants, one of the foundations of the respect and obedience commanded by fathers was their control of the wealth and resources of the community and the family. The process of drawing rural black people into an urban, industrialized environment as workers has been accompanied by a continual decrease in the ability of adult men to exert any control over the community's resources. However an expectation still remains that they should control resources and ensure that all the family's physical and material needs are met. With high levels of unemployment, many men may not be working and are thus unable to contribute to the material support of their families in any significant way. Even fathers who are employed often earn too little to meet the family's demands.

Fathers who are unable to support their families adequately are looked down upon, not only by the community at large but also by their wives and families. Several older generation informants suggested that this situation was a key cause of the erosion of respect for adults and of family instability. Mr A, a 59-year-old messenger, commenting on this situation, reflected, "It is a struggle to make a strong and stable family, given poor financial circumstances."

An informant cited a case of an acquaintance, Mr G, a labourer at a local factory who supports ten children and a wife who is unable to work because of the demands of child care. This worker's earnings are insufficient to adequately support a family of 12. Every Friday evening when he returns from work with his pay packet, his children hope that they will have brought "some refreshments or something nice," and his wife hopes that he will have received a long-awaited salary increase. However each Friday night the family is disappointed. Arguments follow which culminate in the father storming out of the house to a local shebeen. His drinking problem has become increasingly severe and he frequently spends weekends with his girlfriend in town. It appears that neither Mr G nor his family have any understanding of the structural causes of their predicament. The family makes endless demands on the husband and father which he is unable to fulfil.

*His wife just knows that he is the house owner, and that since the old days the father does everything in the family. In the old days the mother of the house was seen as one of the children. Until people reach that understanding that it is the system that does this, the father will always be seen as a failure.*

Situations like these trap families into unbreakable vicious circles with dire consequences for individual family members and the family as a whole. Fathers are victims of expectations

that they are structurally incapable of fulfilling. Their families make demands on the basis of very real needs, then attribute his inability to meet them to personal inadequacy. The father feels humiliated and emasculated, given that the notions of provider, household headship and masculinity are closely interlinked in this frame of reference (Campbell, 1989). He often turns to drink and other women for consolation, squandering a portion of his meagre salary on these indulgences, further embittering his family who interpret these bad habits as further proof of his lack of worth as a father.

Mr A spoke of the humiliation experienced through his inability to support his family. Being unable to fulfil the role of breadwinner undermined his confidence in his role as the head of the family and consequently his right to demand respect from his wife and children.

*It is a very sad situation because one even loses the respect of one's own family when one is not capable of managing the family affairs – to the extent that you get embarrassed whenever you are approached for help which you cannot offer. At the same time you feel humiliated because your family makes comparisons, saying: 'Our neighbour so-and-so has everything . . . why can't we have the same as him . . .,' as if the situation were of your own making. Nobody wishes to fail to satisfy his family demands, but it happens when you have a big family on a small salary.*

These sentiments, linking ability to provide for one's family and respect accorded by the family, were echoed by another factory worker, 55-year-old Mr B.

*I always feel like a father who is a failure, who is not commanding dignity and respect in his family – because I cannot afford to satisfy them in everything they ask. And the reason is simply that the money I get is not enough for all my children. Employers are very unsympathetic in this situation.*

#### *Decline in fathers' status: political factors*

According to the informants, in addition to their role as providers, older men have traditionally played a key role in shaping community opinion and decision making. However the role of the younger generation in shaping township political life in Natal means that their fathers are no longer automatically the dominant parties in community affairs. This is often a source of tremendous conflict. Reference has already been made to the youth's perception of their parents' political passivity, and to many parents' sense of dismay at the bold political aspirations of their children. Further, major political differences between the younger generation and older generation present particularly severe problems in Natal. Sometimes members of the older generation are more traditionalist members of the Inkatha party, while the youth in the same family may support the African National Congress party (ANC).

*Father still believes in the traditional ways . . . he always disagrees with me . . . when I tell him about my views he responds by saying that I am lost. We are not on good terms because of this disagreement. He still believes in traditional leaders and hopes they will liberate us. (M20)*

In this particular family the father, who was a member of the Inkatha party, eventually left home because his wife and other children refused his order that they disown their activist son (M20, quoted above).

Several informants indicated a power struggle between youth and parents for control of the community. There was a

lack of consensus as to the roles of youth and parents with regard to leadership and authority. For many the traditional definitions of adulthood and childhood were being eroded, with no clear alternatives to replace them. Mr P referred to a breakdown in the distinction between "parent" and "child." He said these terms had lost all meaning for the younger generation.

*They no longer know whether we are their parents or whether we are all simply on the same level. When we try and stress the distinction to them it does not really matter because they believe we are not capable of being respected.*

#### **Fathers cling to traditional roles within the family**

The socially sanctioned power of working-class black fathers within the family is often the only arena in which they are able to exercise any dominance, given their relative powerlessness as workers on the lowest rung of the race and class hierarchy in South Africa (Campbell, 1990). As a result they fiercely cling to their roles as head of the family and resent the growing independence of the the younger generation. Campbell (1992b) refers to a crisis in masculinity amongst working-class African men. Undermined within society, many fathers seek to compensate for their powerlessness as black people and as workers by asserting their power within their narrow family circle.

*In my family I do not have fear, I just instil discipline in the way I see fit. My problem is the outside world. It is too big for me to sort out. (Mr D)*

Mr B spoke bitterly of his humiliation and powerlessness at the hands of an abusive young white supervisor at work. He attempted to assert power within his family, which he sought to manage according to the principles of the "traditional" rural community where he had grown up, where young people had unquestioningly obeyed their elders. He appeared unwilling to exercise any flexibility in his attitudes to his children. He found their claims to independence profoundly threatening, using words such as "bitterness," "anger" and "fear" to describe his response to the changing role of the younger generation in township society. In line with his authoritarian structuring of the world, his instinct was to call on some higher authority to back him up.

*Sometimes I wish that I could ask the government to send officials to come to my house and pick up all my children and beat them heavily, and after having got that lesson bring them back. I always think that this will be the solution to their behaviour. (Mr B)*

In clinging so rigidly and defiantly to what is an unworkable frame of reference in a rapidly changing society, Mr B is fighting a losing battle. His children certainly fear him and his angry outbursts, and keep up appearances of obeying him in his presence. However they resent him deeply. Further, as soon as he is out of sight they go their own way (often with the tacit support of their mother). Mr B in turn feels alienated and excluded from the family circle, and tends to spend most of his leisure time away from home.

#### **The position of mothers**

So far this section has focussed on fathers' and grandfathers' complaints of declining status within their families. What is the position of female members of the older generation? On the economic front, families tend to lay far greater emphasis on income-generating ability in their assessment of males than of females. A woman who loses her job can fall back on

her roles as a housewife and a mother. An unemployed man cannot do so, and may suffer from chronic "loss of identity."

Given the patriarchal nature of African social relations, historically women do not expect to have absolute authority, or to command the unconditional obedience that men do. Further, a growing involvement of children in community political life is not nearly as shocking and as undermining for them as it is for men. Several young informants commented that their mothers were more understanding and supportive than their fathers.

*I can simply sum up my relationship with my mother by saying that all that I am is through her. She is always tolerant of my opinions, and of the things I request. There is great understanding and tolerance between us. (M13)*

Further, mothers often appeared to be far more sympathetic to the political aspirations of their offspring than their husbands were.

*Education enabled them [the youth] to question things like the bad conditions we work under and the little money we get . . . They do not want to feel the same pains that we have had . . . Today's children state very clearly that they are not like us who tolerated everything. The time has come for them, because honestly most of what they question is real. (Mrs B)*

*They [the youth] scrutinize things . . . they understand issues involved in education and in this country. One example is the free supply of books and stationery by educational authorities. It is children who fought for this. They wanted to know why their situation differed from other racial groups. They eventually won . . . They challenge these things, and we believe they are cleverer than us. (Mrs D)*

However, while mothers did not seem to feel as undermined by the growing assertiveness of the youth as fathers did, reference was made to particular problems faced by mothers in female-headed families relating to the problem of disciplining teenage boys. Certain young men in the sample commented that it was more difficult for mothers to guide or discipline teenage sons in families where no father was present. Despite the reality that mothers have to play an increasingly central role in family leadership, they are still regarded as second-class citizens in a community where patriarchal ideals dominate (Campbell, 1989). For example, mothers are often not accorded the authority necessary to discipline teenage sons, who, without the stern hand of a traditionally feared father figure to keep them in check, often "run wild" as a result.

*Mother failed to discipline us teenage boys on her own. Boys need a father to guide them. If father had lived with us there would have been a difference. There were many times when we took no notice of mother, unlike the notice we would have taken of a father. (M7)*

*In the old days whenever a child wanted to do his own thing he would be threatened by his father . . . the father would say the last word which would be the deadline . . . without a father a child will boastfully attend any party he likes because he knows very well that his father does not stay at home, and he doesn't take any notice of his mother. (Mrs E)*

Thus it seems that while mothers find the growing independence of the younger generation and the declining authority of adults within families less stressful than their male counterparts, and depend less on their financial abilities for a

sense of status within the family and the community, they do face particular problems in attempts to discipline their offspring, sons in particular. Given that the number of female-headed families has increased dramatically in the past two decades, this is yet another factor that affects the power of the older generation within families.

## Discussion

It has become common amongst a range of social analysts and academics to cite intergenerational conflict within township families as evidence of a "breakdown" or a "disintegration" of the family. Contrary to this position it is argued here that while there is evidence of rapid and marked changes in power relations and notions of respect within families, and although these changes are often a source of distress and confusion, particularly for older family members, such changes are evidence of a "transformation" of family relations rather than a "breakdown."

While the family's role as an agent of socialization may be changing, far from being in a state of disintegration, families are weathering the crisis and in general appear to be remarkably strong in the face of debilitating social conditions. The young informants' references to their own futures invariably involved reference to the families that they themselves would establish. While the youth in the current study did not generally regard the family as their most influential social grouping, it remained a highly valued grouping. Even though they did not necessarily agree with their parents' world-views, young people expressed strong ties of love and loyalty to their parents, and an appreciation for the sacrifices which they had made for them.

While members of the older generation appeared confused and alarmed at changing power relations within families, expressing fears that family life would break down altogether unless traditional relations were restored, the youth, equipped with a wider range of conceptual tools and possible futures, viewed changing family relations as part of the wider social changes that they would see in their lifetimes. These changes were generally viewed with optimism by young people rather than with the unease or disapproval of the older informants.

It should be remembered that in these particular families, the members of the older generation had grown up in rural areas and had moved to the township as adults, bearing the stresses of the rapid urbanization of the South African population within their life-spans. This rural-urban transition had taken place within the context of an extremely turbulent and often violent period in South African history, with the disintegration of the apartheid regime, and the possibility of a radical and large-scale re-organization of power relations between black and white people. This, together with the rapid increase in education and politicization of working-class black youth over the past decade or more, have combined to create a particularly wide gulf between many young people and their elders. It is suggested that many of these strains and stresses are specific to the present historical conjuncture, where a number of factors have made the rapidity of social change as well as disparities in the life experience and expectations of old and young more acute than they were in the past, or are likely to be in the future.

For many members of the older generation, particularly men, the impact of these changes on their lives had not been an easy process. However some older women, who felt less

threatened by changing power relations than their male counterparts, voiced tentative pride and identification with their offspring's independence. Youth had little investment in, and often only scant knowledge of the traditional customs that played such a large part in shaping elders' reality and in particular elders' views of family life. Being better educated and often more politicized than their parents, and having grown up in a society where resistance, protest and debate about alternative social forms had taken place on a larger scale than ever before, these young people did not experience family life as problematic, nor did they share their elders' view that family life was in a state of disintegration.

## Conclusion

Some form of "generation gap" is a feature of a wide range of societies in a wide range of historical contexts. Further, the form that intergenerational conflict takes will vary as a function of particular social and historical circumstances. While the exceptional rate of social change in South Africa made intergenerational problems a particularly salient feature of the informants' lives in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the interviews were conducted, it is speculated here that the severity of the problem could decline as members of the present younger generation come to take their places as parents and grandparents.

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## Notes

1. In this paper, respondents in the "older generation" group are referred to as "Mr" and "Mrs," followed by the first letter of their surnames.
2. Informants in the "younger generation" group are referred to as M or F, depending on whether they were male or female, followed by a number.

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