"Families should stay together": intergenerational attitudes among South African youth

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Abstract

In this article we contest the widespread view that the social or political consciousness that developed among South African youth, as a result of their role in the uprisings of the 1980s, led them to reject the authority of the older generation, in their families and generally. Using the results of a national probability-sample survey among youth of the four main race groups in South Africa, we argue that an assumed political consciousness is not a helpful variable to use in understanding South African youth and their attitudes towards the values of their parents. We go on to disaggregate "youth" according to parental presence and roles during childhood; to find various and changing patterns of parenting, including the importance of grandmothers; and to argue that intergenerational attitudes among young people differ importantly according to these differing formative experiences.

Introduction

If youth are to participate in and contribute to development, it is vital that they are approached in their own social, psychological and political context. However in South Africa this has not been the case. In the heightened political conflict of the 1980s, in which young people played a leading role, it was politically-active youth who attracted attention from academics and journalists, as well as from the main political players. From the liberation movements and their supporters came the image of the "Young Lions," a generation of highly politicized young people leading the struggle against the South African Police and Defence Force on the township streets. From state organs, and popularized by the mainstream media, came the obverse image: that of the "lost generation" who had boycotted and burnt down schools, who had destroyed their own future, and who were instinctively violent and irretrievably delinquent (Seekings, 1993).

In both instances, differing interpretations of the actions of a particular group of young (black) people were ascribed to their entire generation. Those who were not politically active simply disappeared from view. Through the 1980s, South African youth were widely seen to be angry and available for violence. The broader social values of youth, their life-styles and their aspirations remain largely unexplored and unknown.

It is only in the 1990s that this situation began to be challenged, by a series of publications emanating from a national project undertaken by church-based non-governmental organizations amongst South Africa's youth (Everatt & Sisulu, 1992; Seekings, 1993; Everatt & Orkin, 1993; Everatt, 1994).

In 1992 the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) was commissioned to undertake a national study of South African youth by the Joint Enrichment Project (JEP), a project of the South African Council of Churches and the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference. CASE conducted a multifaceted research programme comprising a large annotated database of relevant material, international fieldwork reports (Gevisser, 1994; Budlender, 1994a, b), policy position papers on several topics of concern (Everatt & Milner, 1994; Truscott & Milner, 1994; Hirschowitz, Milner & Everatt, 1994; Budlender, 1994b), and a national baseline survey (Everatt & Orkin, 1993). All were endorsed by participants in the Second National Conference on Marginalized Youth, hosted by the JEP, and formed the policy basis of the National Youth Development Forum. This article is drawn from the national survey.

The results of the survey reflect the feelings and experiences of the approximately eleven million young South Africans from whom the sample was drawn. We begin with a brief analysis of family background which enables us to assess the relevance of attitudes to family and parents. We touch on issues of divorce, apartheid-induced separation through migrant labour, the Group Areas Act and other factors. We look in some detail at the young people's experience of parenting, and then analyse their attitudes towards family and their parents, including the perceived relevance of parental values and the failure of the older generation to set a lead. A final section reports on the results of a factor analysis applied to the data which suggest that formative experiences during childhood might be linked to intergenerational attitudes.

Relevant indications from the literature

A strong family background is an obvious possible bulwark against externally-imposed discrimination. In South Africa, African families have had to withstand the migrant labour system, which removed one or both parents from the family

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home for long stretches of time; the government policy of forced removals which tore families away from the land and communities to which they belonged; the "pass law" system which split families and effectively criminalized family life; and so on. A whole gamut of legislative acts attacked the integrity of the African family.

Assessing the effects of apartheid on the family has been difficult since the African family has been the victim of much unreliable data deriving from poor census figures. In addition, similar to what has been the case with youth, the African family has frequently been analysed in political terms: that is, in relation to its ability or failure to withstand migrant labour, pass laws, and/or forced removals. Beyond these exercises in social engineering, little is known of broader generational, gender or socio-economic tensions, or changing power relations within black families. In particular, although much has been speculated, little is known of the attitudes of youth towards the family or family-related values.

Simkins has pointed to the growth of matrifocalism from the 1960s onwards, and to the increasingly marginal role of fathers even when they were present in the household (Simkins, 1986: 26-27). Burman and Fuchs argued that in the 1980s, despite the absence of reliable national data, "a very high rate of family breakdown, if not of state-recognised divorces" was taking place among Africans (Burman & Fuchs, 1986: 119). It seems apparent that the main replacement of the parental unit are women, whose growing economic importance and increasing prevalence as household heads in the 1980s was noted by Cock, Emdon and Klugman (1986). Jones (1992: 247) used case studies to reveal the enormous disruption of family life and the degree of separation from parents suffered by the children of migrant labourers; again, no detailed contrast was offered with children not born to migrant labourer parents.

More recently, Mamphela Ramphele has described the replacement of the extended family with an "economy of affection," a network of relationships and financial channels which subsidizes the mainstream economy by providing for the indigent, the aged and the sick – but at the cost of "enormous sacrifices" from income-earners at the centre of the networks (Ramphele, 1992: 20).

The criminalization of family life under the pass laws together with the migrant labour system frequently led to discontinued parenting. The family unit was put under enormous pressure by the socio-economic strains of apartheid. It was also strained by those young people who were children in the home but agents of resistance outside of it. The result, according to Ramphele, is that "weakened by poverty, overcrowding, migrant labour and the general sense of worthlessness experienced by some adults, the family is not adequately poised to cope with politicised and rebellious youths" (Ramphele, 1992: 19-20).

Ramphele argues that the role of children and youth in resisting apartheid in 1976 and after undermined traditional relations between children and parents, and between pupils and teachers. This was compounded by the role played by many young people in "policing" consumer and other boycotts in the 1980s. Ramphele reflects a widely-held view that the political role of many young people led to a reversal of power relations between the generations in the late 1970s and 1980s, with the result that "children became used to power and control, and refused to yield to the authority of adults whom they despised – their parents and teachers" (Ramphele, 1992: 17).

Methodology

Prior to drafting the questionnaire used in the survey, 30 focus-group discussions were held with urban and rural youth of all population groups. The fieldwork was sub-contracted to Research Surveys, a commercial market research firm. Research Surveys also assisted with the design of a special sampling frame as the number and distribution of South Africa's youth population was not known. The sampling frame was to include rural youth and youth resident in the former supposedly independent homelands. CASE and Research Surveys estimated South African youth to number approximately 10 724 million, of which 76 % were African, 9,4 % coloured, 2,6 % Asian, and 11,9 % white. (See Table 1.) The fieldwork was conducted in November and December 1992. Stratified area sampling was applied to select 2 200 youth (1 200 African, 400 coloured, 200 Indian, 400 white) between the ages of 16 and 30 (which is the definition of youth used for the purpose of the survey and throughout this article). The final questionnaire was administered during face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice. Due to their small numbers, coloured, Asian and white youth were oversampled. Weighting was applied to the data to ensure that the realised sample was representative of all South African youth with respect to age, sex and milieu.

Table 1
Number of youths (< 30) in South Africa, including TBVC states, by population group (1992) (1000s)

	African	Coloured	Asian	White	TOTAL
Male	4 109	502	139	652	5 402
Female	4 046	510	139	627	5 322
TOTAL	8 155	1 012	278	1 279	10 724

Source: Research Surveys (1992).

The survey results

Divorce and separation

The current situation regarding marriages, as reflected in the survey, offers the first of several surprises. The vast majority of young people, 87 % in all, come from families whose parents have not separated. In turn, all but 7 % of parents are married. This covers rural and urban areas with slight differences: 90 % of parents living in small towns are still together, while 84 % of parents living in squatter camps are still together.

Differences are also evident across the four race groups. Slightly more than one in ten (13 %) young people come from "broken families." This rate is highest among white youth, where almost one in five (17 %) parents' marriages have ended in divorce or separation. In contrast, 97 % of young Asians come from families where the parents are still together. Divorces among coloured families stand at 15 % and among African families, at 13 %.

Apartheid separation

It is important not to take these figures at face value, however; the absence of formal divorce or even of emotional separation should not be confused with a childhood in which both parents were regularly present.

Before 1986, South Africa's influx control legislation sought to force out people "surplus" to labour requirements in the "white" areas. Thereafter African families were per-

mitted in theory to stay together in urban areas. In practice, however, the continuance of migrant labour, as well as the effects of the Group Areas Act and other legislation, ensured that the situation did not alter for many African families.

In addition, poverty determined (and continues to determine) the fact that immigrants from rural areas or small towns to cities frequently ended up either in tiny backyard shacks or in squatter camps. However the repeal of influx control legislation did stop the annual arrest of 200 000 to 300 000 Africans found without their "dompas" (South African Institute of Race Relations, 1987: 336). This afforded peace of mind to parents, and to children whose parents may previously have simply not come home if arrested in a pass raid.

Everyone who participated in the survey was born at a time when "grand apartheid" was at its height (the youngest respondents would have been born in 1976). Despite the changed legal situation after 1986, therefore, a great many black children suffered the regular presence of only one parent, or the absence of both and the substitution of relatives or other adults for blood parents. Although the survey reveals only low rates of divorce or separation, we also found that about one in three (32 %) young Africans grew up without both parents regularly present. This raises questions of parenting and caretaking.

Parenting

The respondents were accordingly asked a combination of questions: whose home they grew up in, who mainly looked after them during their childhood, who was in charge and took decisions during childhood, and others. They were also asked to tell us if they felt they had received as much attention from their blood parents as they wanted; how well they felt they knew their blood parents; and so on.

According to the survey results, approximately two-thirds (68 %) of South African youth of all races grew up in homes where both mother and father were regularly present. There are significant racial differences in this area: almost all whites (91 %) grew up in a home where both parents were regularly present, as did 81 % of Asian and 75 % of coloured youth; as we saw above, less than two-thirds (63 %) of African youth did so.

The benefits of growing up with both parents present may easily be overstated, and there are obviously confounding variables at work, e.g. poorer families are more likely to be separated by the migrant labour system. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that 73 % of African respondents (79 % of respondents of all races) with post-matriculation qualifications grew up in the home of both parents, while only 59 % (58 % of all races) of those with a primary or lower level of education did so.

Caretakers and decision makers

Both mother and father were cited as the main caretakers during childhood by 40 % of all respondents; in the case of a further 38 %, the mothers alone had been the main caretaker during the youths' childhood. These slight differences are reversed among African youth, where mothers alone were the main childhood caretakers (in the case of 39 % of respondents), as opposed to both parents cited by only 35 % of African respondents. Fathers alone were the main caretakers of only 2 % of African youth, and of the same number of youth across the sample.

Mothers alone were the main caretakers of 37 % of Africans born in cities, of 38 % of those born in small towns, of 41 % of those born in rural areas and of 50 % of those born in squatter camps. These variations are small but match migrancy patterns, such as the movement of men out of rural

areas leaving women to rear children, or by women to squatter camps where they head households.

Although fathers were effective co-caretakers in a minority of families, when it came to decision making, they were more often cited as equal with mothers. For youth of all races, the main decision makers during their childhood were often both mother and father. This proportion is highest among white youth, 68 % of whom cited both parents, and lowest among African youth, 40 % of whom cited both parents as the main decision makers during their childhoods. Mothers alone emerged as the second most important people in this regard: for 17 % of white youth they were the main decision makers, as they were for roughly a third of coloured and Asian youth, and for more than two-thirds (38 %) of African youth. In the latter instance, as we have seen, women were also far more likely to be the main caretaker and household head.

Figure 1

Main caretaker during childhood, by age group (African sample)

	16-20	21-25	26-30
Mother	35	41	46
Mother/father	36	35	33
Grandmother	20	14	11
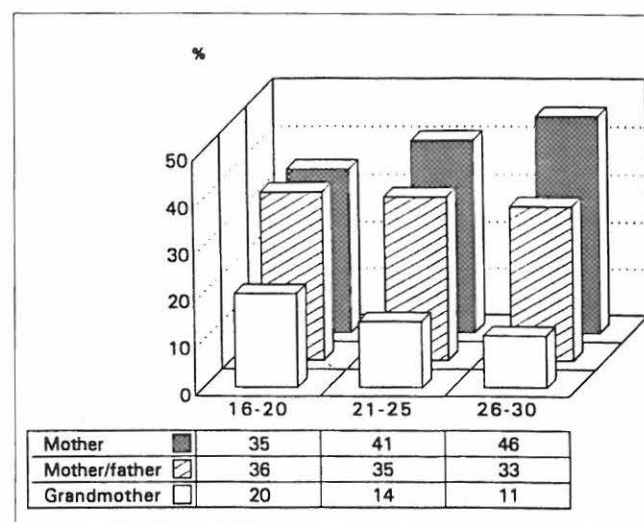
Grandparents as surrogate parents

The age cohorts revealed some important changes in parental presence during childhood. There was clearly a decreasing trend for mothers alone to be cited as the main caretaker during childhood; while this was true for almost half (46 %) of 26-30-year olds, it dropped to 35 % for 16-20-year olds. The replacement for lone maternal caretaking came in small part from both mother and father. This is reflected in the middle row of striped pillars which increased from 33 % among 26-30-year olds to 36 % for 16-20-year olds. This may reflect the abolition of formal influx control. Significantly, however, the main replacement for lone maternal caretaking appeared to be grandmothers, whose role as main childhood caretaker almost doubled from 11 % for 26-30-year olds to 20 % for 16-20-year olds.

Almost one in seven (15 %) 21-25-year-old Africans grew up in the home of a grandmother (compared with 1 % of whites). This increased to one in five (20 %) 16-20-year olds. This is most evident among African youth born in rural areas, for 41 % of whom grandmothers had been the main caretaker, presumably filling in for mothers who had moved to more built-up areas to find paid employment.

In sum, within the parental unit, the bulk of parenting is still undertaken by women. Women frequently head households without men present, but the stress of "the double shift" – paid employment followed by unpaid domestic work, frequently coupled with heading a household – seems to be leading some

women to pass much of the burden of child care on to an earlier generation of women – their own mothers. In other words, the trend described by Cock *et al* (1986) remains, but now with older women helping to bear the burden.

Feelings about parents

We asked respondents to look back on their childhood and to share with us their feelings about the parenting that they had experienced. The results are shown in Table 2 below. In view of the central parenting role played by women, it was no surprise to find that almost three-quarters (71 %) of the respondents of all races claimed that they had received as much attention from their mothers as they had wanted: 20 % claimed to have had "enough" attention and only 9 % claimed to have received less attention than they wanted. This trend was particularly evident among Africans, 74 % of whom had had as much maternal attention as they wanted. For the other race groups the figures are 63 % of whites, 65 % of coloureds and 67 % of Asians.

Table 2

Responses to the statement, "How much attention did you receive from your mother/father?", by gender: frequencies

	African		Coloured		Asian		White	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
As much as I wanted	74	47	65	50	67	54	63	54
Enough	17	24	26	33	28	30	30	32
Less than what I wanted	10	29	9	16	6	16	6	14
N	101	100	100	99	101	100	99	100

M = mother, F = father.

For men, however, the situation was considerably worse. Less than half (48 %) of all the respondents claimed to have had as much attention from their fathers as they wanted; more than a quarter (26 %) said they had received less paternal attention than they wanted. These figures have a strong racial skew: of African youth, who may have been separated by law from parents working in "white" areas, almost a third (29 %) had received less attention from their fathers than they wanted. Among other racial groups, only one in six (16 % for coloureds and Asians, respectively, and 14 % for whites) felt that they had had less attention from their fathers than they had wanted.

As a result, the vast majority (86 %) of youth of all races feel that they know their mothers well, in contrast with only 65 % who feel this way about their fathers.

"Families should stay together"

Having briefly sketched the respondents' experiences of and adult feelings about childhood and parenting, we now analyse youth attitudes towards the family. The respondents were presented with a battery of statements (Likert items) to which they had to respond on a five-point scale, from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The statements covered attitudes to familial, parental and personal values.

One of the basic issues at question in this article is whether the family retains any value to South Africa's youth. We posed the statement, "It's important that families stay together" to the respondents. The vast majority, 92 %, agreed or strongly agreed; 59 % strongly agreed. While this may seem an obvious statement to attract support, it is important that it does so in the face of the widespread claims of family disintegration and youth alienation discussed above.

However, family background appears to have had a differential impact on the respondents' attitudes. As we have seen, 68 % of youth of all races were brought up in the home of their mother and father; only 6 % rejected the assertion. Of the 16 % brought up in the home of their mothers, 6 % also rejected the statement. Interestingly, the statement was rejected by 8 % of those brought up in their grandmothers' home (a total of 13 %), a very small difference from those brought up by their blood parents. Grandmothers, it would appear, are both a relatively widespread parental substitute and are able to inculcate similar values to blood parents.

In contrast, the statement was rejected by 17 % of those brought up in their fathers' home (2 %). The same pattern appears for respondents who had other caretakers during their childhood. These results indicate that youth brought up by the mother and father, or by the mother alone, and slightly less by their grandmothers, have similar family-oriented feelings; those brought up by the father or other relatives are less family-oriented.

Almost all African respondents agreed that families should stay together. Of the 7 % who disagreed, the highest proportion occurred amongst rural respondents, followed by respondents living in squatter camps; far fewer city or small town-dwelling respondents rejected the statement. Those who rejected the statement live at the point where apartheid most impacts on family life.

In short, rejection of the assertion that "It's important that families should stay together" increases amongst those who did not experience a functional family as children; but even then the majority of these young people endorse the statement.

The extended family

Attitudes towards the extended family were also more positive than conventional wisdom would lead one to expect. More than three-quarters (77 %) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that young people "have a duty to look after their relatives;" 32 % strongly agreed with the statement. The assertion divided the sample racially, with 80 % of African and coloured youth agreeing, and only 56 % of white youth doing so. This perhaps reflects the fact that caring for relatives in an extended family is neither an economic necessity for whites, nor a significant aspect of white culture.

Youth of all races living in metropolitan areas were slightly more likely (17 %) to reject the statement than their fellows who lived in others areas; an average of 12 % rejected the statement. African youth living in small towns were most likely (at 88 %) to agree that youth have a duty to look after their relatives. This interestingly confirms the pressure towards nuclear families in most urbanized settings, identified in industrial societies.

Attitudes towards parents' values

Youth of all races seem to have strong family values, endorsing the need for family unity and, slightly less, the support of relatives. On specific questions about parental values, however, matters were less clear.

The respondents were confronted with two deliberately contentious statements. The first statement was: "My parents' values are outdated," which attempted to assess levels of predicted generational conflict. Slightly less than half (46 %) the respondents rejected the statement, while 31 % agreed that

their parents' values are indeed outdated; almost a quarter of the respondents responded "Don't know."

Amongst those who agreed that their parents' values are outdated, a clear racial gradient emerged, which dropped from 33 % of African, through 30 % of coloured and 28 % of Asian, to 22 % of white youth. The greater incidence among Africans of discontinued parenting and separation described above may be important in this regard; so may the political factors mentioned above.

The respondents were then faced with a statement which suggested political differences between youth and elders, namely: "In general, older people have failed to set a lead." One in five, 19 %, found themselves unable to either agree or disagree with the statement; the remainder were almost evenly divided – 40 % rejected the statement while 41 % agreed with it.

Once again, race was clearly the most significant differential on this issue. According to Ramphele, young Africans had witnessed an "intensification of tension between the generations, violence within families, and attacks on authority structures at home and school" (Ramphele, 1992: 20). This does seem to be reflected in the data to a significant degree: 44 % of African respondents agreed that older people failed to set a lead, followed by 36 % of coloured respondents and 35 % of Asian respondents; only 21 % of whites agreed with the statement.

Among African youth, there are few clear demographic differences on this question: men and women were similar in their attitudes, while respondents living in different areas differed only very slightly.

It is interesting to note that there were no significant differences on either of these politically-related questions between youth who are currently members of a political organization and those who are not. However a key grouping in this regard are presumably those who had been politically active during the 1980s but had not maintained their involvement. These young people were not captured as a specific category in the survey, and would require detailed qualitative analysis (e.g. Straker, 1992).

Personal values

The respondents were also required to respond to two statements about their own life-style and lived experience of particular family-oriented values. The first statement was: "People needn't be married before having sex." The sample was again evenly divided: 43 % agreed that people need not be married before having sex but 45 % believed the opposite.

However at the same time, adhering to or supporting a value should not be equated with the ability (or the desire) to live up to that value. This became apparent when examining the second, related statement, namely "It's important to be married before having children." The vast majority, 82 %, of respondents agreed with the statement; this included 94 % of Asians, 88 % of coloured, 84 % of white, and 79 % of African respondents.

At face value, youth seem overwhelmingly to endorse the desirability of children being born into a formal family structure within a wider context of endorsing "family values." However 364 respondents, 17 %, had had children without being married; of these, almost one in four (39 %) agreed or strongly agreed that it is important to be married before having children. The results are shown in more detail in Table 3 below:

Table 3

Responses to statements on family values (all races): percentage distribution*

Statement	Strongly disagree/Disagree	Strongly agree/Agree	Don't know	TOTAL
It's important that families stay together	92	6	2	100
Young people have a duty to look after their relatives	77	13	9	100
My parents' values are outdated	31	46	23	100
In general, older people have failed to set a lead	41	40	20	100
It's important to be married before having children	82	14	5	100
People needn't be married before having sex	43	45	13	100

N = 602

* In some cases percentages were rounded and do not add up to 100.

Analysing the results

The set of statements and their ratings were factor analysed, a process in which the relationship between the values themselves was examined, in order to discover if they would group together or not. The results of the factor analysis should be treated with some caution, since only six questions were analysed; nonetheless, the results were interesting, breaking into three distinct variables or "factors." All respondents were scaled on all three factors, from "high" through "medium" to "low."

The first and strongest factor comprised respondents who *endorsed family values*: youth of all races who agreed that it is important that families should stay together, were also likely to agree that youth have a duty to look after their relatives *and* that marriage should precede having children. This factor saw Asian youth scoring high, while white youth scored low.

The fact that the strongest factor was the "family values" grouping can be seen in a positive light, namely that adherence to generally accepted family values has survived despite all that apartheid tried to do to the contrary. On the other hand the family may be a patriarchal, exploitative and/or abusive structure, particularly in rural communities; simple assumptions that youth supporting "family values" is positive should be differentiated. This is achieved to some extent by the second factor, a negative factor, *parental failure*, where those respondents who agreed that their parents' values were outdated were also likely to agree that older people had failed to set a lead.

This factor is broken down in Figure 2 by family background: whose home the respondent grew up in and who did the caretaking. The sets of pillars show a steady increase in support for the "parental failure" factor as youth grew up with relatives further from their immediate family. Those who grew up in the home of both their parents (the left-hand pillars) split evenly across the scale; only a third scored high on the factor. Youth who grew up in the home of their mother

scored predominantly medium or high on this factor; less than one in five scored low. Those youth who grew up in the home of any other adult relative scored appreciably higher.

Figure 2

"Parental failure" by childhood: "high" score only (all races)

	Mother/father	Mother	G'mother	Father	G'father
Home	32	42	41	48	56
Caretaker	32	36	40	40	53
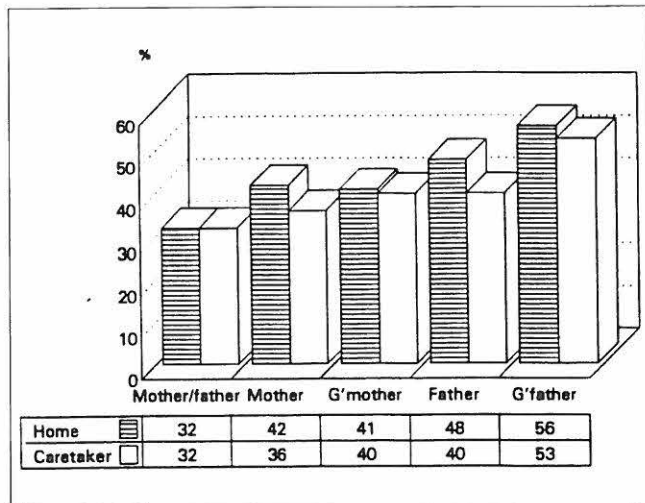
The pattern of these results is repeated when the main childhood caretaker is examined. The factor analysis serves to reveal a pattern not evident before: namely, a clear link between endorsing "parental failure" as a broad value and family background.

The view that marriage is an unnecessary prelude to sex did not group with either of the two preceding factors, and is regarded here as a *teenage* value. Whites (particularly English-speakers) scored high on the teenage value, as did African youth and those youth who do not belong to any religion.

Conclusion

The data offered cannot demonstrate causal links between childhood circumstances and youth rejection or acceptance of family values. Other variables need to be considered; more detailed qualitative information would also be important.

However the existing assumption that generational conflict arising from politicization led to a rejection of parental and family values seems incorrect as a reflection of current youth attitudes. Most young people grew up in two-parent families, even if the father tended to be absent more often than was comfortable for the children, and thus involved grandparents in caretaking.

Young people value the family as an institution and, especially among Africans, the extended family. They preferred to envisage their own children being brought up in similar circumstances. These broad patterns varied with socio-economic factors.

By moving towards actually uncovering the lived experiences of young people with controlled samples countrywide, we may come closer to understanding South Africa's youth.

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