

Child care by the elderly and the duty of support in multigenerational households

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Abstract

This paper discusses an investigation of the extent of child-care services rendered by lower-income elderly persons formerly classified as coloured, and the consequences for them in terms of current finances, future support, and status and control within their families. An interview study was conducted among a sample of 100 women drawn from lunch clubs in poorer areas of Cape Town. Interviews were also conducted with a wide range of social workers, club organizers, religious leaders and welfare officials. A third of the sampled women were providing child care. As a result of this service, together with the housing and financial contributions which they made, the women played an important role in the welfare of their descendants.

The purpose of the study

As South Africa enters a new era, the provision of pensions and community services is being rethought as apartheid society is reshaped. The elderly as child carers are involved in both these areas of provision. However, relatively little is known about the extent or implications of such child care in the many different communities into which apartheid divided South Africa – and which are likely to remain largely separated for some time to come.

In 1987 the Socio-Legal Unit at the University of Cape Town conducted a study of child care in African townships around the city (Burman, 1989), the findings of which had various implications for policy planners. However, the poorer coloured townships in Cape Town have community histories, family patterns, income sources, child-care provision, and attitudes which differ from those in the African townships: the degree of difference is such that it could not be assumed that child-care problems or solutions would necessarily be the same in the coloured communities as in the African communities.

A complementary study to the earlier African study was therefore undertaken in selected coloured townships over a two-year period (1992-94), with a view to making subsequent policy recommendations. The aim was to investigate the extent of child-care services rendered by lower-income elderly people formerly classified as coloured, and the consequences for them of the provision of child care in terms of current finances, future support, and status and control within their families. The underlying hypothesis, based on the findings of the study in the African townships, was that the high rates of divorce and illegitimacy in Cape Town's lower-income coloured communities, and possibly the high cost of much non-

familial child care, would result in a high proportion of the elderly having to provide such care, with multiple effects upon their finances and way of life.¹

Methodology

A purposive sample was drawn from women who attend lunch clubs in the poorer areas of greater Cape Town, to ensure a lower-income population for the study. The sample of 100 women was drawn from one club in each of four areas: Manenberg, Ravensmead, Kasselsvlei and Mitchell's Plain. Interviews were conducted with the sampled women, using an open-ended interview schedule.²

To contextualize the data, interviews were also conducted with a wide range of social workers, club organizers, religious leaders and welfare officials. In addition, a range of peripheral anthropological, sociological and legal studies were consulted (e.g. Preston-Whyte & Allen, 1992; Eekelaar & Pearl (Eds), 1989; Western, 1981; Van der Merwe & Groenewald, 1976). Life histories of people from the sampling area and other areas were compiled to identify problems of which we might otherwise not have been aware.

We also sought to gain insight into a lacuna in our sample which may have resulted from our sampling method, i.e. an almost entire absence of Muslim respondents (only one interviewee was a Muslim), although Muslims constitute some 16 % of the coloured population in the area.³

The extent of child care provided by the elderly

At all four clubs where we drew our sample, members met over lunch and left at about 15:00, though some individuals would leave earlier. Given that few interviewees brought children with them to the clubs, the nature of the sample almost certainly resulted in an under-representation of women who provided full-time child care. To visit a club would have meant that they would have had to find a substitute childminder for the duration of a club meeting – which may not have been an easy task, especially as some of the clubs met daily. The sample therefore probably under-represents the extent of child care in the communities studied, both in numbers and hours.

For the purposes of the study, child care was defined as broadly as possible. Interviewees were asked whether they spent any part of the day looking after children. Thirty-four per cent reported that they did.⁴ An analysis of the nature of the child care undertaken showed that 14 of the 34 interviewees who provided child care (41,2 %), cared for children after school or creche, or "half day" – which half is not clear. The

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remaining 20 carers (58.8 %) provided all-day care, had children living with them without the parents also being in the house (12, i.e. 35.3 %), or cared for them from early morning until after school, when parents who worked in schools returned home.

A few of the live-in children whose parents were absent returned to their parents' homes at weekends but most were fostered, either officially or unofficially.⁵ Of the remaining children who received after-hours or full-day care, slightly over half actually lived in the house with their parents, who were away at work during the day. Nearly all the children in all the above care categories were grandchildren or great-grandchildren of the caregiver. However, four interviewees were fostering apparently unrelated children, one cared for a husband's great-niece, one for her own great-niece, and two provided day care for a neighbour's and a stranger's children, respectively. In other words, only eight of the 34 caregivers were providing care of any kind to children who were not their direct descendants; only in three cases did the children not live in the same house as the caregiver. None of the caregivers was providing a commercial day-care service, although, as will be discussed in more detail below, many received some payment.

We examined the generational relationship of the women to the children for whom they cared. Our hypothesis was that great-grandmothers, possibly benefiting from an additional generation available to undertake child care, would be less likely than grandmothers to be providing it. This hypothesis was only partially supported by the data. The life histories and other contextual interviews in the study showed that it was not unusual for a woman to become a grandmother by her late-thirties and a great-grandmother by her mid- to late-fifties; a grandmother might therefore still be engaged in paid work, with the child-care duties of the family falling to a great-grandmother. Nonetheless, only one woman in the sample of childminders was a great-grandmother (aged 79 years); she was caring for the daughter of a granddaughter who lived with the interviewee in the interviewee's council house.

Recasting our hypothesis in terms of age rather than status, we hypothesized that many women may have escaped child-care responsibilities later in life, as a need for such care diminished as children and grandchildren grew up, and as advanced age made the women more reluctant to undertake the work. We therefore compared the ages of the women in the sample who were currently providing child care with those who had provided care in the past. Although the clubs that were sampled were officially for the elderly, the club members included a few people who were below retirement age but were in receipt of disability grants; they were not excluded from the sample. The youngest of the childminders was 51 years (she was also the youngest by six years in the total sample) and the oldest was 81 years (the oldest in the total sample was 90 years). However, the average age of the childminders, 68.8 years, was less than three years lower than the average age of the total sample – 71.4 years. Age, within obvious limits, would therefore not appear to be a deciding factor in the provision of child care by the elderly.

The late age at which the women were providing child care proved to be due to a number of factors. The average number of children born to the 100 women in the sample was 6.6. We hypothesized that women who had very large families, which we defined as ten or more children, would be most likely to have children late in life and would therefore also be providing child care for grandchildren late in life. However, this was not borne out by the data. Of the sample of 100, a fifth had families of ten or more; seven of these women (35 %) were

still providing child care. On the other hand, of the 52 interviewees with families of six or fewer children, 18 (34.6 %) were also still providing child care. The reasons why the women in the sample still provided child care were therefore more complex, and the consequences more unpredictable, than any simple correlation of the above type. No doubt reasons of affection played a role, especially among the part-time carers, but necessity appeared to be important too. While none was currently looking after the children of adult children who had died, at least three had done so in the past and a further two had cared for the children of deceased relatives. In addition, three interviewees were caring for children abandoned by their own children, at least one for the children of her divorced children, at least five for their children's illegitimate offspring, and ten for others who were possibly illegitimate descendants.⁶ In other words, at least nine interviewees (26.5 %) were currently child carers through force of circumstance as much as choice; the actual percentage was almost certainly considerably higher. In addition, there were financial considerations, which will be dealt with below.

While the majority of the women told us that they did not find it tiring to look after the children and that they did not wish for more free time, there were dissenting voices: five said that they did indeed find the work tiring and two wanted more free time for themselves. We were also told of children who were difficult to discipline and control, and whose material needs were a burden to the carers. Only three of the women had a home help, two of whom lived in the interviewees' houses. However, in one case an interviewee had apparently fostered many children in the past, which no doubt provided both the need and the means for such assistance; in the other case, the home help was a friend without income. Probably the numerous other house occupants whom our survey revealed provided some assistance in many other cases. We therefore sought to gain a picture of household circumstances by analysing who lived in the same house as each interviewee.

This produced further complexities when taken in conjunction with the provision of past and present child care. Of the sample of 100 women, 59 had provided child care for children other than their own in the past (42 to grandchildren, though not necessarily exclusively), but 37 of them were no longer doing so. In seventy-five cases grandchildren and great-grandchildren who were younger than 18 years were living in the same house as the women, but so were other potential child carers – almost entirely younger-generation family members, many of whom we were specifically told were currently unemployed. Some women even volunteered the information that these other household members provided the child care. (Significantly, however, although in at least two cases unemployed fathers were available to provide child care, the grandmother was doing so instead, as was the case in a further six households which included unemployed sons.) It would therefore seem that the availability of alternative child carers – usually women – within a household is a very important factor in deciding whether a woman continued to provide child care. Given this factor, the presence in the household of younger mothers who are divorced or unmarried will not necessarily increase the amount of child care required of the elderly, as long as the mother is unemployed – or, alternatively, is earning enough to pay for creche, after-creche, or after-school care.

Similarly, the effect of changes in the economy on the interrelationship between child care provided by the elderly, by other family members, and by paid carers is obviously complex. More jobs for the (largely unskilled) younger mem-

bers of the households who had been helping with the children would, at first sight, necessitate more child care by the elderly. However, it might also enable parents to afford more paid after-school and after-creche care, and might lead to fewer multigenerational households (98 % in our sample, though the younger members of a household were not always descendants or even relatives of the interviewee) – with the result that older relatives might not be so conveniently situated for providing care. To complicate the picture further, the size of the pension may interrelate with a willingness of the elderly to provide child care if they are paid for this service, either by their children in cash, goods or services, or by the state for official fostering. Further, it is possible that undertaking paid foster care may go with a willingness to provide family child care (though we found this in only one case among the 34 child carers), but the opposite could also have been hypothesized. The micro-level financial implications of child care are therefore examined below.

The finances of child care by the elderly

In our sample, money to cover the expenses of at least 42 children being cared for (but not the caregiver's own children) was provided by people other than the caregiver: 34 by the children's parents (or, in one case, the child's grandmother, who was unrelated to the caregiver); at least four by the state foster system; and one by the state through a maintenance grant. For at least a further three children the parents provided for some but not all of the expenses incurred.⁷ It would therefore seem that of the 34 caregivers in the sample, three provided some of the costs of the care and seven all of the costs. Of the latter, three had two children living with them – a considerable expense – though all but three of the ten children in question were their grandchildren.

In two cases the carers had additional help in the form of a home help; in one case the (two) children's mother contributed to this expense.

It is noteworthy that six interviewees provided paid foster care (one was paid by the child's grandmother, who was unrelated to the carer), and that at least 13 had done so in the past, some for several children. (In addition, it is possible that another eleven had provided such care, although it is not clear whether they were paid.) Three who had fostered children in the past were still doing so, having cared for a total of ten children. Whatever the motivation, this would have provided a substantial income; currently the payment for foster care is R274.00 per month, though before September 1993 individuals classified as coloured were paid less as a consequence of the then unequal remuneration of foster carers in the different "racial" groups.

We would have liked to have had qualitative information on how willingly parents volunteered their contributions towards the expenses of their offspring, but such sensitive information could not easily be obtained within the existing time constraints, requiring less structured – and less public – interviews. However, an informant volunteered the information that, until three years before, she had received child maintenance from her unmarried son whose two children were in her care, but that subsequently she had received nothing, despite her efforts to that end. As it was, her daughter and another son were having to contribute to the household, and she indicated that her patience was exhausted: "I went to Maintenance on Monday, 26 April. They will arrest him and force him to pay."

Given that over a sixth (6) of the elderly caregivers were definitely providing all the finance for the children in their care, and that another three were partially providing, we sought information on what other sources of income they and

the rest of the sample had. Of the entire sample of 100, all but six received a state old-age pension; a further three received a disability grant.⁸ In addition to the state pension, two received extra pensions from non-state sources, one of which was a widow's pension and the other a work pension. A further two interviewees received widow's pensions (one in conjunction with a work pension) but no state pension; one received no pension, although aged 64, but her husband still worked. Of the 16 husbands who lived with the interviewees, ten received state pensions, three received work pensions (exclusively), and two received disability grants. One was still working.

Of the 34 women who provided child care, 31 received a state pension, two a disability grant, and one was the case mentioned above whose husband still worked. In addition, one received both a state and a work pension, while two were benefiting from their husbands' state pension, two from their husbands' work pension, and one from her husband's disability grant.

At the time of the fieldwork for this study, state grants for persons classified as coloured were still administered by the House of Representatives. Interviews with the pension officials revealed that it was not possible for a grandmother to apply for a state maintenance grant for a child living with her for whom she was providing financially. We were therefore interested to learn that a woman in our sample of 34 child carers was receiving a state maintenance grant for her illegitimate granddaughter in lieu of the child's mother, who was retarded and lived with the interviewee. (In addition, a disabled woman was receiving state maintenance grants for her two children.)

Thus, while pensions and grants may not be generous, it may be seen from the above that no household in the total sample was without at least one regular source of income. Indeed, among the child carers, eight (23.5 %) were in receipt of incomes from two such sources.

The informal market sector is growing rapidly, and we therefore inquired from the interviewees whether any of them received additional income from this source. Of the 100 interviewees, six reported that they obtained extra income by a variety of means: one worked for a bookmaker; one was a part-time domestic servant; two sewed clothing and sold the products; one sold jam and preserves; and one sold knitted garments. Four of these women were child carers. In addition, two interviewees mentioned lodgers as a source of income; other replies indicated that relatives in the house made occasional contributions.

Although a sensitive question, particularly in view of a risk that deductions might be made from pensions, we investigated whether any interviewees had savings on which they could draw should they need to. None had.

We were interested in what major and unavoidable drains there were on the incomes of the elderly in our sample, other than basic necessities, and how these correlated with the provision of child care. We therefore first looked at the number of unemployed people in households. While such persons might be available to provide child care, they would probably be living at least partially on the income of others in the house. We found that in the 100 households, at least 25 included unemployed descendants (or their spouses) of the interviewees, and one an unrelated ex-foster child. Seven households contained two or more unemployed people, one as many as four. When we investigated these households for other sources of income, we found that all were benefiting from the state pension of the interviewee. The smallest household consisted of five occupants; five households contained eight or more members; the largest had 17 members, of whom

ten were children. In four of these seven households there was only one employed person; in another household, of 14, there were only two employed persons. The state pension was obviously a crucial source of income for all of them.

In nine households where there were unemployed members, the interviewee was providing unpaid child care (in two cases a grandmother was providing such care for the offspring of one of her children but was being paid to care for another's). Only in these two households was fully-paid child care being provided; in one household where there were unemployed members, the interviewee was providing partially-paid child care. In the seven households with two or more unemployed members, no interviewee was providing child care of any kind, probably because the unemployed members were doing so.

While these figures give some indication of how the financial drains of unemployment were mitigated or aggravated by the provision of child care, it is not possible to use them to explain the relationship between the two phenomena. Household budgets with many demands upon them might lead women to undertake paid childminding to help meet the deficit, but a conjunction of unemployed members in the household and paid – or unpaid – child care may also be a result of chance circumstances, or even of a warm and caring personality.

Other essential expenses might be those associated with the need for housing: rent or repayment of bonds. An analysis of the ownership of the houses in which the interviewees lived showed that 40 lived in council houses (of which eight were in the names of the women's descendants or relatives with whom they lived, not their own or their husbands' names); 39 in houses which they or their husbands owned; 14 in houses owned by either their son or daughter (or their spouse) with whom the interviewee was living; one in a house owned by a grandson; one owned by a cousin's daughter; and two in houses owned by non-relatives (in the latter four cases the owner lived in the house). Three interviewees declined to give details. In other words, at least 71 interviewees lived in houses either rented or owned by them or their spouses, while 24 were dependent on their descendants or younger relatives for their accommodation.

However, this finding is a little misleading. When the 71 interviewees in whose names the houses stood were asked who paid the rent (or, where houses were owned rather than rented, the bond repayments), it transpired that 23 interviewees (and their spouses, on occasion) were the sole payers; four did not contribute at all (in every case but one, either children or grandchildren paid the rent); and in the remaining 36 cases where the payer was known (a further eight declined to

Implications for intergenerational family relationships

The wealthier a country is, and the larger its pensions, the more the younger generation is in fact – though not in law – relieved of the duty to provide support for parents, grandparents and great-grandparents.⁹ South Africa, economically a middle-range country with members of the different population groups receiving state grants and pensions of different amounts until very recently, has not had generous pensions, particularly for those groups not classified as white. Therefore assistance from younger generations could be expected to assume considerable importance, especially in the lower-income ranges.

In practice, however, based on the above information, assistance between family members in our sample was far from being all in an upward direction, i.e. from younger generations to the elderly. The pensions of eleven interviewees were apparently the only source of income in their households; a further six interviewees provided child care without payment either in cash or kind; three received only partial payment for their services; and 23 made accommodation available to their descendants without any financial assistance from them. In the light of this, even inadequate pensions were clearly of great importance for the welfare of more than only the elderly members of the family, and those in receipt of pensions were of consequence in the households. Moreover, given the other assistance rendered by the elderly in terms of child care, it is evident that they continue to play an important role in the welfare of many of their descendants. The findings of interviews with social workers and community workers bore this out, and also indicated that it resulted in the elderly not only remaining in the family structure but enjoying considerable status within it.

Much of the above results from the current debilitated state of the economy. If – as the new government intends – pensions, child care and housing provision increase, and unemployment decreases, there may be a number of long-term implications for mutual family support patterns of which all may not be beneficial. A likely consequence of improvement in the economy would be that care by the elderly for younger generations would decrease, with a resultant loosening of bonds linking the elderly to the family – which in turn could have consequences for familial care of the elderly in later life. While this need not be disastrous, depending on what alternative care is available, experience to date in the developed

would be a more serious situation in South Africa.

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Notes

1. The last available figure for illegitimacy in the Cape Town population classified as coloured was 44 % – in 1989-90 (City of Cape Town, Health Department, 1990); since then births have not been racially classified. The latest divorce figures for the South African coloured population (1992) – Cape Town statistics were not provided separately – showed a ratio of one in 3.58 marriages ending in divorce (Central Statistical Services, 1992); this figure is probably misleading as interviews indicated that the number of desertions without divorce might well increase the number of single-parent families significantly. Neither Muslim marriages nor divorces are recognized by South African civil law, and therefore do not appear in the official figures.
2. Very few men were found to attend the lunch clubs. Further, pilot interviews indicated that it was unlikely that any men would be providing child care. A more detailed discussion of the methodology employed in the study may be found in the 1994 research report to the HSRC/UCT Centre for Gerontology, entitled "The consequences for the elderly of their provision of child care."
3. Although the population census figures are unreliable in this regard, it is generally accepted by Muslim organizations in Cape Town that Muslims constitute about 16 % of the population of the metropolitan area. Yet only one of our interviewees was a Muslim. Interviews with other informants indicated that the most likely reason for the very low representation of Muslims in our sample was that the older generation of Muslims are usually strict observers of Muslim dietary laws, which would prevent them from becoming members of lunch clubs where these laws are not observed. Our inquiries revealed that there are no lunch clubs for Muslims, a result of the strong emphasis in Muslim communities on family care rather than community care.
4. This figure is considerably lower than the corresponding figure in the earlier study of African elderly, which was 83 %.
5. The term "foster care" is used in this paper to cover both official foster care in terms of Section 15 of the Child Care Act of 1983 and private foster-care arrangements. Where official foster care is referred to, it is specified as such. The dividing line between official and unofficial

fostering is somewhat blurred in practice: according to social workers of the former House of Representatives whom we interviewed, it is common for parents to disappear after leaving their children (most commonly illegitimate children) with grandparents or other relatives. The grandparents or relatives then apply for the child to be placed in their care as a foster child. As the application process takes several months, in cases of great need a temporary retention order may be made, which entitles the caregiver to a grant for about 12 weeks.

6. Illegitimacy, a sensitive subject, sometimes had to be inferred from the family circumstances which were revealed, rather than from direct information.
7. Some interviewees would provide only scant information on their financial circumstances.
8. State welfare regulations provide that no person is entitled to more than one social pension or grant for herself/himself from the state. The three interviewees who received disability grants were below the age at which a person may qualify for a state old-age pension.
9. On the legal situation of the duty of support, see Boberg (1977: 249-50, 276) and Lee and Honoré (1983: 181-91).

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