

Heteronormativity in narratives of fatherhood: Cross-cultural experience

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Morison, Tracy & Macleod, Catriona (2015) **Men's pathways to parenthood: Silence and heterosexual gendered norms.** Cape Town: HSRC Press. ISBN 978-0-7969-2503-9 pbk. Pages ix + 197.

Mzikazi Nduna

School of Human and
Community Development
University of the
Witwatersrand
Johannesburg

mzikazi.nduna@wits.ac.za

This book discusses the experiences of White Afrikaans adult men and women's parenting decision-making. In this book, the authors share insight on decision-making in relation to childbirth and childrearing from an under-researched South African community – those with distinctly Afrikaans heritage. The data shared in this book corrects some assumptions about childbirth. One of these is the assumption that childbirth is planned; and that for older, mature, parents the decision to have a child is a result of a deliberate and conscious decision-making exercise. The data presented from the authors' research shows that even for married people, or older people, pregnancy just happens. The tension between planned versus unplanned pregnancies is seen as a tension that differentiates youth from adults. Hence the sanctioned and targeted scholarships and interventions geared specifically towards teenage pregnancies. This study shows that in this respect teenagers may not behave any differently from their older counterparts. The difference between unplanned pregnancies in relationships of married and older couples and those that happen out-of-wedlock in adolescence is the readiness and resourcefulness of the parents. Readiness here does not imply pre-planned and anticipated, because, as this book notes, even with older and married couples pregnancy

comes unplanned, but is welcomed. In essence, the couple may have been ready, and though they did not actively seek to fall pregnant, they may have not acted to prevent it either. This fashion of accidentally falling pregnant is universal.

Whilst unplanned pregnancy indicates a lack of planning and therefore not being ready for the baby, the undertone used with this discourse associates such pregnancies with the lack of resources needed to provide and care for the child. “Unplanned” assumes that the parents did not prepare to make sure that they would be able to take care of a child if or when a child arrives. If resources were optimally available, the planning would not take centre stage in the discourse of planned/unplanned pregnancies. This discourse around planned pregnancy also assumes that coupledom mobilises resources; and hence, out-of-wedlock pregnancies are received circumspectly or discouraged. In South Africa, where more than 50% of children are born and raised by non-married parents (Meintjes et al, 2015; Pillay, 2016) this assumption only serves cultural nostalgia.

The Afrikaans-speaking white community is regarded as a conservative and secretive community. This is even more so regarding discussions of family-life, which inevitably lends itself to talking about Afrikaans nationalist culture. Reflections of “holding back” and feelings of betrayal of ones’ Afrikaner culture as an insider researcher are shared in a study of fatherhood by a young scholar (Bouwer, 2017). The authors of this book are commended for this valuable study, which was evidently undertaken courageously and carefully. This study undoubtedly broadens horizons and grows scholarship on fatherhood and fathering in South Africa. Scholarship on fathering, fatherhood, and father connections in South Africa over-relies on data collected from Black African and lower socio-economic class samples (see, Richter & Morrell, 2006; Swartz & Bhana, 2009; Makiwane et al, 2012; Nduna & Khunou, 2014; Padi et al, 2014; Meintjes et al, 2015; Pillay, 2016). The authors of this book were courageous enough to lift the veil from the white, middle-class community, and more so the Afrikaans community. This requires self-preparation, reflection, courage, and the acknowledgement that, in knowledge, silence equals systematic bias. In the case of South Africa, this systematic bias feeds into stereotypes against the most researched and racialized ethnic groups.

My reading of this book was foregrounded by the question “so how are white Afrikaans men’s pathways to parenthood different from other population groups in South Africa”? The answers, from this data, suggest that their methods are more similar than different. The experiences shared here are similar to experiences reported from studies of parenthood for married, heterosexual couples in black communities. For instance: the lack of a decision to get pregnant; the responsibility for family planning that is left to the female partners; the role of grandparents in the decision to have a child or keep a pregnancy; the tensions with the individual’s other plans (usually career and

professional development); the best interests of the child; the gendered parenting and role modelling, etc. Similarly, the motivation to have children in order to “carry on the family name” (Nduna & Khunou, 2014) is also regarded as culturally important within a patrilineal African society. Just like sex is implied by the agreement to courting, this book suggests that parenthood is implied by the prior choice of marriage. This suggests that the couple, and significant others, would be disappointed if the “marriage-procreation bond” did not happen. This is so across cultures. I find the outcomes of this study fascinating in the way in which they link the fields of sexuality, reproductive health and families. The book breaks some of the stereotypes about racialised masculinities. This study contributes to understanding of inter- and intra- groups in South Africa, and is valuable for contemporary social psychology. It also drops the veil and allows us to see patriarchy and its subsidiary, heteronormativity, for what it is: an ideology that cuts across cultures and class. **Men’s pathways to parenthood** is a good read for all scholars of masculinity, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and queer studies. It is also a necessary read for those who believe that patriarchy is an ugly feature of the underdeveloped, traditional African (read Black) community. Those who continue a scholarship that represents Black people as a population that is fraught with problems of gender power inequity and male dominance need to read this book to appreciate that these issues are universal, and so interventions aimed at changing relationship dynamics should target all groups.

It is confirmed (on p 109) that in this society parenting work and paid work are constructed as separate spheres, and yet they require the same human resource. The idea is that adult, able-bodied, healthy and gainfully employed men and women cannot choose one of the two: they have to demonstrate their ability to do both, simultaneously and successfully, in order to prove themselves worthy. This is a shift from the separation and gendered channelling of productive (paid) and reproductive (unpaid) work, which were reserved for men and women respectively. Parenthood as a fulfilment of the “requirements” of what it means to be an adult man or woman is true of all men and women in pro-natalist heteronormative societies. Whether this expectation serves the best interests of the child needs to be explored truthfully by the pronatalists as the findings here suggests otherwise. It would seem that pronatalist norms cancel out “choice” for some men and women, as they then fall into spontaneous childbearing in order to fulfil the heteronormative matrix.

Reading in this book about the “conditions” that support pathways to parenthood for men reminded me of unpublished data from an AFSA (AIDS Foundation of South Africa) study on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) that was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal (Nduna, 2016). Young men in Eshowe, who find themselves bound by the pronatalist notions of what it means to be an adult, questioned, interrogated, and

rejected the ideal conditions for starting a family that are premised on financial stability. For them, the reference to resourcefulness through income cannot be a consideration in whether or not one could start a family. For them, having a stable income is a privilege in South Africa, and suggesting that this should precede parenthood was tantamount to reproductive injustice. Further, in a pronatalist society, it would confine men to a status of being a minor in perpetuity as there are no guarantees of securing gainful employment in these small and rural villages. What is important here, especially for South Africa, is that publishing these stories humanises what the Apartheid system racialised in South Africa through separate development, and the impact of which continues to be felt two decades later in race-biased science.

The methodological reflections offered here are useful for the reader and are skillfully woven with the discussion. Some of the researchers' experiences with the interviews and the respondents' behaviour resonate with our experience in the father connections research team at Wits University. For instance, the difficulty respondents felt when speaking about their taken-for-granted everyday life experiences in research, and offering these as important information for the researchers.

The research topic of parenthood in relation to fatherhood is a political one. This is so because it lends itself to studying men. Studying men and fatherhood subjects the phenomenon to feminist epistemologies, as doing parenting is in fact about doing gender, on many levels. Feminist epistemologies are political in nature as they seek to unpack gender power manifestations and intersectionalities with race, class, sexuality, etc. In this book the authors have beautifully woven their use of feminist research methodologies into the study. This has resulted in a fine, uncomplicated, and yet theoretical piece that makes the book an easy read. Undergraduate and postgraduate students alike can read this book. Whilst it is written academically and uses disciplinary language, it makes easy reading for different audiences and its usefulness transcends the academy.

References

Bouwer, W (2017) **Adolescent white men's understanding of fatherhood in the context of growing up without a father**. MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.

Makiwane, M, Makoe, M, Botsis, H & Vawda, M (2012) **A baseline study on families in Mpumalanga**. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council. Human and Social Development, Population Health, Health Systems and Innovation, CeSTii.

Meintjes, H, Hall, K & Sambu, W (2015) Demography of South Africa's children, in De Lannoy, Swartz, S, Lake, L & Smith, C (eds) **South African Child Gauge 2015**. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.

Nduna, M (2016) Aligning sexual and reproductive health rights with traditional and religious systems. **Baseline study report Case Study 3: Eshowe**. Durban: AFSA and the University of the Witwatersrand.

Nduna, M & Khunou, G (2014) Editorial: Father connections. **The Open Family Studies Journal**, **6**, 17.

Padi, T, Nduna, M, Khunou, G & Kholopane, P (2014) Defining absent, unknown and undisclosed fathers in the lives of young people in South Africa. **Sociological Reviews South Africa**, **45**, 44-59.

Pillay, J (2016) Children in South African families, in Makiwane, M, Nduna, M & Khalema, E (eds) **Life and times of children in South African families**. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Richter, L & Morrell, R (eds) (2006) **Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa**, Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Swartz, S & Bhana, A (2009) **Teenage Tata: Voices of young fathers in South Africa**. Cape Town: HSRC Press.