

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context.
Mikhail Bakhtin

THE SOCIAL & THE INDIVIDUAL: RETHINKING THE SOCIAL NORM OF SILENCE INFORMING PARENTING IN MPUMALANGA, SOUTH AFRICA

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Mzikazi Nduna, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Interview by Ana Fonseca

Ana Fonseca: Hello and welcome to Radio Heteroglossia, I'm Ana Fonseca and our guest today is Dr. Mzikazi Nduna. [Dr. Mzikazi Nduna](#) is a researcher in Psychology, Head of the School of Human & Community Development, and an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. Today, we will be talking about the article written by Dr. Nduna in collaboration with [Dr. Yandisa Sikweyiya](#) entitled, "Silence in Young Women's Narratives of Absent and Unknown Fathers from Mpumalanga Province, South Africa," published in 2015 in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. Their article provides insights into the tensions between the social and the individual through an analysis of the narratives of young women's experiences of the silence surrounding their absent fathers in Mpumalanga. Dr. Yandisa Sikweyiya wasn't available for this interview. Dr. Nduna, welcome and thank you for joining us today.

Mzikazi Nduna: You're welcome.

Ana Fonseca: To start with, I would like to ask you what led your article to focus on the experiences of absent fathers, particularly among young women in Mpumalanga?

Mzikazi Nduna: Thank you Ana. That is a very good question. In South Africa, for a long time now, we have an increasing number of children who grow up without their fathers. Up to half of children in South Africa grow up in households where the biological father is not part of that household. In some cases, they know the father and they have a contact, but their father is not part of the same household. But in other cases, these children do not even know who their father is. The rate of absent fathers is highest in the Mpumalanga province. And that is how we got to choose to do this qualitative study in the Mpumalanga province. Up to 60 percent of young people in this province grow up without living in the same household as their biological father. Our research experience from South Africa also tells us that there are quite a number of studies that have focused on the relationship between a father and son. And, in the context of those scientific studies, the phenomenon of absent fathers for the boys is researched. However, there's very little that has been researched on the relationship between fathers and daughters. In particular, there really has not been research on young women's experiences of an absent father. That is located in a broader cultural phenomenon where the presence of the father is considered to be important for a boy, and the presence of the mother is considered to be important for a girl. But psychology tells us that, in fact, the presence of the father is also important for the girl. So, it's important for us to understand the experiences of young women who grow up without their fathers.

Ana Fonseca: Your article highlights the importance of considering societal family norms and the AIDS epidemic in South Africa as part of the broader context within which the problematic of absent fathers in Mpumalanga develops. I wonder if you can talk more about this.

Mzikazi Nduna: The society that we researched holds traditional social norms with high regard. These societal norms expect that young people will respect older people. And respect is demonstrated in a number of ways. In terms of the parenting approaches in this community, people tend to be authoritarian. This approach to parenting, given that respect is considered to be very important, can be a hindrance to communication between children and their parents. So, it is that societal norm where children are not afforded an opportunity, for example, to ask questions; and specially to ask questions that might be interpreted by older people as disrespectful. So, for example, if you're asking your mother about your absent father, you are in fact asking your mother about their sexual experience. It's not an

easy conversation to have in the household, in a context to where parents do not necessarily talk about sexual relationships or romantic relationships with their children. So, it becomes a sticky point because, the children themselves that we interviewed feel inadequate to speak to their mothers and ask their mothers because of this norm. But also, the mothers themselves feel inadequate to talk to their children about this topic. So, it is both ways, and this is because of this norm that in households young people and older people do not have a conversation, which is a two way process, around sex and sexuality. Also, in Mpumalanga, particularly where we conducted this study, this is a District in Mpumalanga, it's called the Gert Sibande District. Gert Sibande District has the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS in this country, South Africa. Because the District has experienced a high mortality rates, male mortality rates, in South Africa right now we have the anti-retroviral program. It has saved lives. However, before we started the anti-retroviral program in 2003, we had quite high male mortality rates that resulted from HIV and AIDS. Even now that we have the anti-retroviral program rolled out, we still have quite high male mortality related to TB. TB remains our problem, and TB coexists with HIV. That leads to problems with the high mortality of men. And in this District, again, in the Gert Sibande, there's high levels of mobility because it is a migrant area because of the coal mines, for example, and men who move in and out of this particular District. That migration, access to men through employment that is available in this district, all of these are vectors for HIV infection; and that leads to problems with AID treatment and mortality.

Ana Fonseca: Yeah, and I would assume that there is still a lot of stigma around AIDS and to talk about their fathers having died from AIDS.

Mzikazi Nduna: Yes, there's still a lot of stigma around HIV/AIDS in South Africa. We have reduced the number of deaths from HIV. But in terms of gender, we found that we're saving women's lives more than we're saving men's lives. So, you are correct and I agree with you that, to some extent, there is the problem of even communicating about the cause of death when their father has died of HIV.

Ana Fonseca: What would be the impact of the silence about their absent fathers, that these young women experience, in their society at large?

Mzikazi Nduna: Unanswered questions are a source of distress for young people. Young people would like to know. We do understand that parents have reasons to protect their children from knowing about their father. But from interviewing young people themselves, they tell us that they would like to know and answered questions result in distress. We know that distress is related to internalizing behaviors, it's related to substance use, it's related to depressive disorders. So, the mental health consequences of unanswered questions are quite problematic. Also, if there is a community that the social norm is around silence and not communicating about absent fathers, then that's what we call the "intergenerational transmission of silence." So, it does breed a communication pattern of avoidance. It teaches children that it's ok to not to tell. So, I think we need to break that silence.

Ana Fonseca: In your article, it is argued that basing a South African family policy on social norms, "can be problematic and oppressive if some of these norms are not serving the best interests of the child. For instance denial of pregnancy by men could be argued to be a norm in this society and so is not disclosing the identity of a child's father." Along these lines, later on in your article you argue that, "Avoiding disharmony and distressing the family is highly valued by these young women. However signs of unexpressed negative emotions such as anger, frustration, temper and distress associated with silence are reported here and elsewhere." These two arguments made in your article draw attention to the tension between the individual and the social by showing both the potential negative effects that certain social norms can have on individuals, and participants' conflicting narratives about their need to fulfill societal family expectations that encourage silence at the expense of their own individual feelings of repression and pain. I wonder if you can talk more about this tension between the social and the individual that is evident in the narratives of the participants of your study and the potential flaws that you notice in certain social norms that encourage silence among these women. And, how do you think such tension between the social and the individual can be conciliated in this context?

Mzikazi Nduna: Thanks Ana for that observation of this part of our findings. In this paper, we are arguing that the democratic shift in the country needs to guide parenting, rather than the nostalgic feelings of, "this is how to we do things as Africans." Because you find that parents want to hold old ways of doing things. For example, they want to hold to a phenomenon

called *intlawulo*. *Intlawulo* means payment. In this scenario, if a person has made someone pregnant, they should make a down payment to acknowledge the pregnancy in terms of money. If the person does not pay the money, it means that they have not officially acknowledged the pregnancy. Failure to officially acknowledge the pregnancy in this way might mean that, in particular the maternal grandmothers, may not allow their grandchild to see their father or to have a relationship with the father. Because they feel that they are owed something by the man who made their daughter pregnant. So, it is this shift that requires that we re-think our ways of doing things. If as a society we allow people to exist as individuals within the community and to be able to make choices as individuals whether to participate or not to participate in some of our customs, then that would allow people, for example, to not pay *intlawulo* but still have a relationship with the child. Because, on the other side, according to law, the father is obliged to pay private maintenance of the child. So, these are the individual-kinship tensions that we speak about in this part of our findings. In South Africa, for example, the National Department of Home Affairs has responded to this shift in social norms and, in 2013, they announced the introduction of the *unabridged birth certificate*. The unabridged birth certificate allows the mother to give all the details of the parents, both the mother's full details and the father's full details, on the birth certificates. We did not have that in South Africa, surprisingly. So, it's a new phenomenon. What it means is now we need to encourage the community to accept that this shift is supported by the official policy and that we need to implement this and disclose details of the father. Of course, when the father is known. So, I think these are some of the tensions and this is some of the ways in which as a country we can support the shift in social norms.

Ana Fonseca: In addition to the policy approaches to address these tensions between the social and the individual, the old and the new, which you just described, and coming back to a point you made early on in our conversation, your article mentions the existence of an intergenerational conflict among young women and their elders and the need to create and equip older and younger people with a language that allow them to communicate and foster “intergenerational dialogues” about this problematic. How do you envision these intergenerational dialogues?

Mzikazi Nduna: In this article, when we make the recommendation that we need to foster intergenerational dialogues we're talking of everyday conversations

in households; we need to make it normal, we need to make it cool to have these conversations in our households. This is something that is possible if we give information to people, if we encourage these conversations and equip both parents and children with the skills. It may require a bit of a shift in the way that we parent so that we don't create a situation where respect equates fear. Because that is what our research participants talked about a lot, that our children fear us because that's how we parent and that is how we have been taught to parent. So, in order to foster intergenerational dialogues, we need to open up possibilities in our homes for these conversations to take place.

Ana Fonseca: Absolutely. Having that conversation, that dialogue between generations to develop mechanisms that allow them to make the old and the new coexist is definitely the challenge and the opportunity as well.

Mzikazi Nduna: Yes.

Ana Fonseca: Dr. Nduna, thank you so much for your time and for sharing with us your views and knowledge about these issues.

Mzikazi Nduna: You're welcome. Thank you so much for being interested in our research.

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