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Full Length Article

Young families become mindful of their possibilities through the appreciation of their family life



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ABSTRACT

Young families, as viewed through a multi-generational lens, provide the environment in which children can be nurtured and socialised. The purpose of the research is to explore and describe how the parents and grandparents of young families appreciate their family life. A qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual multiple case study design was used to conduct the study. Purposive sampling methods were applied to select families according to the sampling criteria, each family representing an individual case study. Appreciative inquiry interviews were conducted with the young parents and available grandparents, during which the participants were asked four open-ended questions. Data collection was enriched by means of reflective letters to participants, collages created by the young parents, and the researcher's field notes and journal inscriptions. The data collected from each individual case study was analysed and then synthesised by means of a cross-case analysis. A cross-case validation report was compiled. The themes and categories that emerged from the data were discussed. The research study concluded that when young families embarked on a journey of discovering their strengths and potential in the larger family system, they creatively envision and discovered the possibilities to transform their destiny in a purposeful and constructive way.

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1. Introduction and background

Young families are the nurturers of the next generation who need a strong foundation in order to become conscious leaders of the future. The family, as the core institution for child-rearing worldwide, plays a fundamental role in the development of healthy individuals in every community

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(*Child Trends*, 2014:3). The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social welfare (WHO, 2006:1). This holistic approach to health is essential for establishing a healthy society by promoting the health of individuals and families. The primary role of the family is that of socialisation of the children, by which means cultural norms and values are transferred to the next generation (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013:4). The healthy development of a child in a harmonious family environment is of fundamental importance to the mental health of the family as a whole, bringing about a positive effect on communities and society overall (Centre on the Developing Child, 2013:1; Fahey, Keilthy, & Polek, 2012:1; Holborn & Eddy, 2011:1).

Globally family life has undergone many changes over the last few decades, influenced by various social and economic factors (*Child Trends*, 2014:4). Even though the structure, functioning and processes of families have changed over time, the family has nevertheless survived as the core unit of nurturing (Kaakinen & Hanson, 2015:3). In South Africa, many children are reared in families comprising different and complex family compositions due to factors such as poverty, divorce, violence, unemployment, death and diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Holborn and Eddy (2011:1) confirm the effect of socio-economic challenges on family life in the South African context, leading to complex family compositions such as grandmothers living with grandchildren, single parent families and child-headed families. Even though there has been a decline in the prevalence of the nuclear family structure as basic unit, it still comprises about one third of the South African family composition (Statistics South Africa, 2012:7). Marriage as an institution in South Africa is on the decline, making room for cohabitation and other living arrangements. The significance of the extended family's value has also been at stake globally as well as in South Africa, which has left young families more vulnerable. Gaibie (2012:1) confirms this concern regarding South African families and emphasises the significant role that grandparents and other family members' support plays a in maintaining the mental health of the family.

Many research studies have been done on what goes wrong in families, the many challenges that families encounter due to relationship problems, modern disease, trauma and environmental influences. As researcher I observed that research studies done in the past five years on the positive aspects of family mental health were roughly less than one tenth of all the research articles I searched for that focus on families. With this research, the focus is turned away from a problem-oriented perspective to an inquiry into what works well and the strengths and potential that uphold young families. Greeff (2013:274) confirms a recent shift in paradigm among family mental health researchers who are increasingly turning away from a pathological focus to a strength-based perspective.

1.1. Problem statement

When a young couple falls in love and decide to be together and raise a family, they have dreams and high expectations for themselves as a couple and for their future family life. Marriage ceremonies and other cultural celebrations surrounding marriage confirm and strengthen these expectations

from friends and family. Becoming parents enters them into a period of continuous family transition from conception onward through pregnancy, birth, early childhood, the teenage stage, adolescence and adulthood. This is an irreversible process that brings about emotional, spiritual, physical and mental changes for the couple and that leads to new experiences and growth for the young couple and collectively for the family (Cowan & Cowan, 2012:432).

The responsibility of raising a family in modern-day life can pose a huge challenge to young parents. The fast pace of life due to the digital and industrial explosions of the last two decades has brought about enormous changes in communication and interaction within the family as well as challenges for parents to mediate Internet and social media use in their families. Young parents may find it overwhelmingly challenging to raise a family and to support themselves financially. In most cases, both parents have to work long hours and find ways to balance their work responsibilities with family-care demands (Haddock, Zimmerman, Lyness, & Ziemba, 2006:207). Relationships may become demanding and divorce may perhaps be seen as the only solution, leading to disruption and a negative impact on the mental health of the young couple and their children. The divorce rate in South Africa is on the increase, with the most vulnerable group being young couples with young children (Statistics South Africa, 2013:6). The challenges that the young family faces also affect the grandparents. It seems as though the young families that start to lose hope for their family unity have also lost sight of the dreams they once envisioned for themselves. It might be that their dreams got lost in the changing reality of their everyday lives and that the couple's awareness of who they wanted to be faded or never realised.

Young families need guidance on becoming more conscious of how they could keep their families intact, nurturing their relationships, appreciating their strengths and still dreaming and envisioning a future for their families that is attainable.

1.2. Aim of the study

The aim of this research study was to explore and describe how young families appreciate their family life.

1.3. Definition of key concepts

1.3.1. Young family

For the purpose of this study, a young family is described as a heterosexual couple with one or more young children, married or living together for 10 years or less. The young family is viewed from a multi-generational perspective, as part of a bigger family system that includes grandparents or other significant family members who engage with the young family on a daily basis. All family members are seen as whole persons with the dimensions of body, mind and spirit who are functioning in an integrated, interactive manner with their environment (University of Johannesburg, 2012:5). Young families also refer to young couples and young parents in this study.

1.3.2. Appreciation

The concept *appreciation* was taken from the Appreciative Inquiry approach (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008:2), originally aimed at the facilitation of change in organisations. For the purposes of this study, appreciation is applied to inspire and mobilise the members of the young family to value their family life by engaging them in a quest of discovering their strengths, imagining what might be, stimulating dialogue between them and to mobilise them to execute a plan of action, creating the future they want for their families. The young couples and participating grandparents use appreciation to recognise the best within themselves as individuals, as couples and as members of an extended family.

1.3.3. Mental health

Mental health refers to a state of well-being that allows an individual to realise his or her own potential, to cope with the normal stressors of life, to work productively and to contribute to the welfare of society (WHO, 2014:1). Family mental health refers to the ability of a family to live harmoniously in a changing internal and external environment, allowing the healthy development of each individual to his or her highest potential, with emphasis on the healthy development of children (WHO, 2006:1).

1.3.4. Mindful

In order for the young family to enhance their mental health, they need to become mindful of their experiences in their internal and external environments. To be mindful is a state of being through which a person becomes engaged with what happens in the present moment as life unfolds. Mindfulness is cultivated by paying attention to present-moment experiences without judgement and with kindness and compassion (Cayoun, 2011:12).

2. Research design and method

2.1. Research design

A qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual design was used for the study. Using a qualitative design allowed the researcher to study the young families in their natural settings (Richards & Morse, 2013:291) in order to gain insight into their unique life experiences (Grove, Burns, & Gray, 2013:66) and to give an in-depth description of what has been discovered (Burns & Grove, 2011:34). The unique context of each young family's environment was taken into account (LoBiondo-Wood & Harper, 2006:134). This research study was done within the paradigm of postmodern social constructivism (Mahoney & Granvold, 2005:74), through which the young families became active participants in the unfolding of their realities.

2.2. Research method

In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants, using four questions that were formulated according to the 4D-model of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008:5). A

multiple-case study approach was used as the preferred strategy to investigate the real-life context of the selected young families (Yin, 2014:17). Toles and Bareso (2012:120) confirm that case studies are indicated for the intensive investigation of a single unit in order to understand the distinctiveness of the individual case, and may be used to identify patterns across a set of cases.

2.2.1. Population and sampling

The population of the study was young families from Afrikaans- and English-speaking communities in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. A purposive sampling method was used to handpick the cases for specified suitable characteristics (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007:114). The sampling criteria included young heterosexual couples who were married or living together for ten years or less, with one or more children. The available grandparents were also interviewed. In this study the grandparents refer to the young couples' parents and thus the young couples' children's grandparents. Five families were selected for participation. Each young family as a unit of analysis represented a case study.

2.2.2. Data collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants using four open-ended questions, each representing an element of the 4D-cycle of the Appreciative Inquiry process (Cooperrider et al. 2008:5). Discovery: *What works well in your family?* Dreaming: *What would you like to change?* Design: *What will you do to see these changes?* Destiny: *How will you do it?* Follow-up interviews were conducted with the young couples, one month after the initial interviews, to enhance further engagement in the appreciative dialogue, after which the researcher wrote reflective letters to the young couples. The participants responded with a creative collage dream board portraying the dreams they shared for their families. Cooperrider et al. (2008:6) encourage dialogue, stating that individual discoveries become collective appreciation that the group shares as a vision. Interviews were conducted with the available grandparents. The researcher kept observation and field notes as well as journal inscriptions. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and case records were kept for all the data collected from each young family as a case study.

2.2.3. Data analysis

The researcher, as well as an experienced independent coder, analysed the data by means of the open-coding method described by Tesch (in Creswell, 2014:198). Data collected from each young family was analysed as a case study, representing a *whole story* (Yin, 2014:55). Sense was made each of the five young families' stories. The central storyline of the research became clear and was described. The printed data was read and reread several times and themes and categories started to emerge. A case study report for each individual case was described within the structure of the identified themes and categories. Cross-case analysis was then done to compare commonalities and differences across the cases (Yin, 2014:147). A cross-case validation report was written and the findings supported with a literature study.

Table 1 – Participants appreciation of young families.

Themes	Categories
1. The young parents discovered their strengths as caregivers of their families, their ability to adapt to changes in work and family life and expressed their appreciation for the grandparents' support.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The young families discovered their dedicated commitment to care for the well-being of the family. 2. The young parents expressed their appreciation for each other's ability to adapt their roles in marriage and career to suit the needs of the family. 3. The young parents discovered their appreciation for the support network provided by the grandparents.
2. The parents' and grandparents' dreams for the young family include quality family time, well-balanced healthy children and core values and traditions transferred to the children.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family time as top priority. 2. Children as well adjusted in society. 3. Family values.
3. The young parents adjust their career lives to fit in regular family time. They have routine in their households, open communication for strong family relationships and values are transferred intergenerational.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family time depends on a balance between career life and family life. 2. Routine and discipline are building blocks to well-adjusted children. 3. Transfer values to next generation.
4. The young parents expressed that they became conscious of the role models they are and to plan family time purposefully.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Setting an example as role models. 2. Purposeful planning of family time.

2.3. Ethical considerations

During each phase of this study, the researcher demonstrated ethical responsibility towards the participants by recognising and protecting their rights to autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice (Burns & Grove, 2011:117–120). The participants signed voluntary informed consent to agree to participation, to allow audio recordings of the interviews and to confirm their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (Punch, 2014:44). The researcher ensured that the privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were protected in a respectful manner. Audio material was handled with integrity and kept under lock and key for two years after the publication of the research.

2.4. Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this research was ensured by using Lincoln and Guba's (1985:289–221) guidelines for credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The credibility or truth value of the research was ensured by means of measures such as prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review, member checking and reflexivity. Transferability was reached through purposive sampling, dense descriptions of the participants' demographics and with direct quotations from interviews (Pilot & Beck, 2010:503). Strategies to attain dependability included triangulation of research methods, in-depth descriptions of the research design, research methods and data analysis (Yin, 2014:89). All voice recordings, transcriptions, field notes, dream boards and reflective letters are kept safe for two years after the publication of the research. Confirmability refers to the neutrality of the study. The researcher used triangulation of methods and reflections to enhance neutrality. Throughout the research process, a panel of experts were consulted to review the progress and findings.

3. Results and discussions

The central storyline of the research was described as: *All the participating members of the young families became*

increasingly aware that they engaged on a journey of discovering who they were as a family. Results were discussed using the themes and categories that emerged from the data analysis. See Table 1 for an overview of the themes and categories.

The results are discussed based on Table 1.

Theme 1: The young parents discovered their strengths as caregivers of their families, their ability to adapt to changes in work and family life and expressed their appreciation for the grandparents' support

Category 1: The young families discovered their dedicated commitment to care for the well-being of the family

The young couples gave each other credit for their hard work and dedication. They shared the responsibility of nurturing their children. This was confirmed by the grandparents. Quotes from the interviews:

'It really helps when you can support each other ... that we have a common goal to work towards ...' (Case study 3, young mother).

'... he is hardworking, takes care of us ... he really gives his all ...' (Case study 1, young mother).

'... we are on the same page concerning the children ... priority for both ...' (Case study 4, young father).

'... constant interest in the children ... a beautiful upbringing of the children ...' (Case study 4, paternal grandmother).

Grossmann and Grossmann (2009:2) report from two longitudinal studies that children's experience of sensitive, supportive parents sets the children down on a pathway of positive psychological development. Literature has many times confirmed the importance of secure attachment during infancy as predictor for positive mental health outcomes later in life. Gordon (2014:234) confirms this by means of a synthesis on attachment theory that correlates secure attachment in infancy with adult well-being from several disciplines. The young families in this study were all appreciative of their awareness of and ability to ensure good attachment with their young children to enable the mental health of their developing families. To be an aware and responsive parent assists in creating resilience, creativity, interest in life and efficient learning in children (Siegel & Hartzell, 2013:53).

Category 2: The young parents expressed their appreciation for each other's ability to adapt their roles in marriage and career to suit the needs of the family

The young woman appreciates her partner by saying: '... is a very involved father ... they can always rely on him.' The paternal grandmother appreciates their adaptability, sharing: '... role distribution that both agree upon' and the maternal grandmother confirms: 'she is a creative person, he gives her the freedom ... he loves to cook ...' (Case study 3).

The young mother (case study 1) realises: '... some things you actually cannot do anymore because now you have a child ... I have to look for another job ... the working hours and all else will better suit the needs of me and my family.'

After the baby has been born, the young mother (case study 2) resigned her well-paying professional job and started a new practice from home to allow her to continue nurturing the baby, stating: '... it works well that I am working hours that suit me.'

The young mother (case study 5) explains: 'We have a ... I can almost say a partnership ... We can support each other well.' The young father confirms that around bedtime he takes care of the boy and she of the girl: '... this is the way we share the responsibilities.'

The young families showed adaptability in their family roles and work lives. They described their shared responsibility as *teamwork*. They divided tasks according to personal preferences and proficiencies. This correlates with a study done by Carlson (2013:23) on the process of dividing household chores among young couples. Driver, Tabares, Shapiro, and Gottman (2012:73), who studied couple relationships for over three decades, confirm that happy couples continue to talk about their relationships in terms of teamwork and that such couples also tend to emphasise the same beliefs, values and goals. Koen, Van Eeden, and Rothmann (2012:350) accordingly report that sharing responsibilities and chores were contributing factors for psychosocial well-being among South African families.

Category 3: The young parents discovered their appreciation for the support network provided by the grandparents

The level and type of support received from the grandparents varied from family to family. The grandparents played different roles in the lives of the young families such as caregivers, friends, mentors, family custodians, role models and more tangible support providers. Gaïbie (2012:3) identifies similar roles played by grandparents as shared by adolescents.

The young parents trusted their parents to be involved in their children's lives and see them as a stable factor in their children's lives. O'Neil (2007:1) confirms this. Quotes from the participants:

'... we have a very good support structure ... it is a very good safety net that we have' (Case study 5, young mother).

'... like we grew up ... the same rules ... the same ideas ... same religion' (Case study 5, young father).

'Both our parents set a good example for us' (Case study 1, young mother).

'It is a very socially interactive relationship we have ... the physical support ... really amazing ...' (Case study 3, young father).

'I appreciate our time together ... the support that we give ... we still give a lot of financial support' (Case study 4, maternal grandmother).

Theme 2: The parents and grandparents' dreams for the young family include quality family time, well-balanced healthy children and core values and traditions transferred to the children

Category 1: Family time as top priority

Spending time together as a family was very important to all the families and they yearned to spend more time together as a family. Confirmation from the data:

Priority as a family: '... we need our time together ...' and as a couple: 'Just me and him ... we are still learning more about each other' (Case study 1: young mother).

'To do things together ... like when we go camping they join us ...' (Case study 2: grandmother).

'... take the bikes and go for a ride ...' (Case study 3: young father).

They dreamed to have more planned activities together as a family, such as holidays, weekends away, and doing things together such as walking, fishing and cycling. They also appreciated special family occasions and family gatherings with the extended family. All the young parents expressed that they realised that if they wanted to be present in their children's lives, they had to consciously plan activities to spend time together as a family. Koen et al. (2012:346) confirm family togetherness as the most prominent theme in a study exploring family mental health in South Africa. Daly (2001:283) also found that the experience of a scarcity of family time was a common factor among working parents.

Category 2: Children as well adjusted in society

The grandmother (Case study 1) wanted to see her grandchildren as: '... to study, well brought up and that they are happy ... love, love, love ... is the greatest gift and then communication.'

The young father (Case study 5) wants his son to fit in: '... for him to fit in well ...'

The young mother (Case study 4): '... that all goes well with them at school, well adjusted, good at making friends ... well socialised.'

Peterson et al. (2014:40) confirm these same elements as a result of a study done among young expectant parents about their hopes and dreams for their children.

Category 3: Family values

The participants shared the following:

Case study 4, young mother: '... the children can come to us and talk to us about everything, to have a good relationship with our children.' The paternal grandmother: '... contented, happy family ... continuous growth ... meaningful communication ... a clear knowing where they get their help from.'

Case study 1 shared the following family values on their dream board collage: 'Health, fitness, healthy children, family time, annual holidays, finances, dream house, clothing, happy family, peace, religion.'

Young parents and grandparent shared very similar values for the family. The young couples valued marriage stability and fulfilling relationships. They wanted to be happy. Spiritual values and traditions were important to them. Koen et al. (2012:348) confirm that spirituality is positively related to happiness in families. Good health, enough rest, vacations and fun-filled physical activities were common values expressed by all the participants. Hirsch and Smith (2010:1–5) found much similar family values shared by parents.

Theme 3: The young parents adjust their career lives to fit in regular family time. They have routine in their households, open communication channels for strong family relationships and values are transferred inter-generational

Category 1: Family time depends on a balance between career life and family life

All the families wanted to be financially secure and able to support the growing needs of their families. Several studies done on the correlation between marriage stability, socio-economic status and educational attainment (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010:685; Dakin & Wampler, 2008:300) have shown that financial security has a positive impact on family mental health. The grandparents also wanted to see the young families financially independent; all the grandparents still supported the young families in some way. Hardie and Lucas (2010:1152) interviewed of over four thousand married and cohabitating couples, and found that financial support received from their parents had a stabilising effect on the young couples' relationships.

Planning for the most effective use of family time was very significant. All the families attempted to balance work time with family time, prioritising the needs of the children: '... to make better use of the available time that we have' (Case study 1: young mother). '... it is to balance the amount of time you spend at home and the amount of time you spend at work ...' (Case study 3: young father).

Category 2: Routine and discipline are building blocks to well-adjusted children

To establish routine and discipline in their households and to build strong family relationships with open communication channels were strategies that the young families planned in order for their children to be happy and well-adjusted in school and in life and to learn good socialisation skills. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2013:303) confirm that clear forms of communication in young families contribute to healthy family functioning. Grose (2002:39–41) stresses the importance of routine and consistent discipline in families, as it leads children to being independent and responsible:

'... a little discipline and routine that they will get used to before they go to school ... start understanding responsibilities ...' (Cases study 4: young father).

Category 3: Transfer values to next generation

'That is why I hope that the strong family ties with which we brought up our children, will happen in their families' (Case study 3: maternal grandfather).

'To discipline them ... and their value system is learnt that way' (Case study 5: maternal grandfather).

'I think basically that one transfer the caring for each other' (Case study 2: maternal grandmother).

The participants regarded it important to mirror values such as love and caring relationships, spiritual and religious values, freedom to communicate and lasting marital union to their children. Walsh (2012:354) confirms that most families raise their children with strong moral and spiritual values in stable, caring and committed bonds.

Theme 4: the young parents expressed that they became conscious of the role models they are for their children and to plan family time purposefully

Category 1: Setting an example as role models

'I saw those basic values that one gave them ... embedded in them ... think it might also come from my ancestors' (Case study 4: maternal grandmother).

'I think it is very important that you have a happy marriage, because you are the only role model the child has ... he will build on it ...' (Case study 3: young father).

The young couples acknowledged that they are their children's primary role models, and thereby demonstrated an awareness of their role in shaping the characters of their children. They wanted to transfer spiritual and family values to their children. Bernat and Resnick (2006:S10) confirm that spiritual connectedness, learned by a child as a result of a healthy attachment to the primary caregivers, is essential for that child to develop into a healthy adult. Sanchez-Miguel, Leo, Sanchez-Oliva, Amado, and Garcia-Calvo (2013:169) found that parents, who are role models to their children in sport participation, promote their children's enjoyment and motivation to take part in sport activities.

Category 2: Purposeful planning of family time

The young families shared the following during the interviews: 'Sundays, it has almost become a routine ... we take the dogs ... drive around ... stop and walk around' (Case study 1: young father).

'We have a date every morning at five o'clock, drink coffee together ... talk about the things ... make arrangements for the week ahead' (Case study 5, young mother).

'... to find activities which the children can, can do with us, even if it is just cycling' (Case study 4: young mother).

Hirsch and Smith (2010:3) confirm in a report on family values that parents perceive factors that lead to the strengthening of family relationships and that promote the long-term health of their children as core necessities for their families.

4. Conclusion

When young parents are given the opportunity to awaken the awareness of their strengths, opposed to weaknesses, they embark on a journey of discovering the possibilities for their family life. The young parents and the grandparents became mindful of how they conduct their lives and of the profound effect they had on each other and, especially, on the overall development and happiness of the young children. They recognised the importance of being involved in each other's lives and showed love, compassion and acceptance towards each other. Their visions widened and they became creative in developing attainable plans to enhance their relationships and the healthy development of their children. They reached a heightened awareness of the purpose of their family togetherness and the significance of each individual family member.

4.1. Original contribution of the research and recommendations

This research can be seen as an original contribution to the field of nursing. Research into the positive aspects of family mental health is still a relatively unaddressed research area and very relevant to psychiatric nursing practice. This study

confirmed Appreciative Inquiry interviews with participants as a valuable instrument to facilitate the mental health of young families and it could be further developed and applied by advanced psychiatric nurses.

Author contribution

F.E. Jacobs prepared the article and the research was supervised by M. Poggenpoel, C.P.H. Myburgh and A.M. Temane.

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