

# **Mothering in Limpopo, South Africa: Perspectives of Adolescents**

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Mothering is recognized as important in shaping adolescent children's identity cross-culturally, but *how* people understand and practice mothering varies between social contexts. In post-apartheid South Africa, the institution of the family is undergoing changes that affect mothering. This study aimed to explore how 22 adolescents in the Mankweng area in the impoverished Limpopo Province understand mothering. Through focus group discussions, diaries, photographs and interviews, we explored adolescents' experiences of being mothered and the adolescent women's future aspirations about becoming a mother. We used a phenomenological approach in our analysis, and we identified three main themes: responsible mothering; trusting relationships and aspirations about responsible mothering. Responsible mothering involved being present, providing and guiding. Trusting relationships meant that the mother was the primary confidant of and a role model for their future lives. The aspirations about future mothering emphasized values related to gender equality and represented a break with their experiences of family life.

The "family" is a dynamic institution, which is adapting to the political and social environment. In the Republic of South Africa, "family" is being discussed as a multilayered concept, where there are several models existing side by side (Mathambo & Gibbs, 2009). In the post-apartheid society, the social and political conditions for family life have changed. Given the multifaceted family institution and the dramatic political shift, social scientists describe the development of the "family" as a complex transformation (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). One of the legal aspects of the transformation is

the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (Minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, 2012), which strongly calls for the equal participation of women across ethnic groups in the economy and in positions of decision-making in the labor market. The ideal of a dual-earner family, in which both women and men are earning an income, is gaining prominence (Akande, Adetoun & Tserere, 2006). An increasing number of women are formally employed (Lubbe, 2007) at the same time as women remain the primary and often sole caretakers of children (Akande et al., 2006). The profound changes in the legal status and the social role of women in contemporary South Africa may have implications for mothering practices and for the expectations of mothering that need to be explored.

The current situation of the family institution in South Africa, has been described as being under pressure, “in a state of crisis” (Holborn & Eddy, 2011,p.1). South Africa has the highest estimate of men being absent from their family in sub-Saharan Africa (Posel & Devey, 2006). The divorce rate has doubled, and the number of households headed by single women has tripled since 1983 (Wittenberg & Collinson, 2007). It is an increase of child-headed homes, where all members are younger than 18 (Mturi et al, 2005; Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Another facet of the described crisis is the high rate of domestic violence and violent deaths in men (Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

One of the main drivers behind these circumstances is the legacy of male labor migration during apartheid. This system forced African<sup>1</sup> men to separate from their families to work in the urban areas (Posel & Devey, 2006). Still, South Africa is being ranked as one of the most consistently unequal societies in the world (UNDP, 2010), where African families remain the most economically disadvantaged group of citizens (SAIRR, 2011/2012). The unemployment rate has reached 36% (SAIRR, 2011/2012). Men in the rural provinces migrate more than ever to find work (Posel & Devey, 2006; Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Some are living away from their family household for most of the year. In the Limpopo Province, 60% of adult men do not reside in their family household for more than 6% of the year (Collinson, Tollman, Kahn, Clark, & Garenne, 2006). African children more commonly have an absent (51%) than a present father (31%) (SAIRR, 2011/2012). Economic contributions from the labor migrant father may be limited. Failing to provide economically may, according to Ramphele (2002, p. 158), be a “burden of failure that becomes intolerable”, and fathers may leave their family in a physical and/or a mental sense.

Another main driver behind the situation of broken families is the HIV epidemic (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). African women of reproductive age (15–49 years) have a higher prevalence of HIV infection than men and women in all other population groups (Shisana et al., 2009). Women of childbearing age now account for 90% of the new infections (Iwelunmor, Zunga, & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). There are 2.5 million orphans due to AIDS (UNAIDS, 2012).

In this social context of labor migration, unemployment, economic poverty, and the HIV epidemic, some social scientists underline the importance of paying attention to strengths and potentials the in the family institution (Nkosi & Daniels, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> In demographic reports, the population of South Africa is often described as African (79%), White (9%), Colored (9%) and Indian (2.5%) (SAIRR, 2011/2012).

Given the increase in female-headed households and men living apart from their family for large parts of the year, the practices of mothering may appear as a particular important capacity. Mothering refers to the social practices of nurturing and caring for dependent children from birth to adulthood (Arendell, 2000). According to Ruddick (1994), mothering is performed by anyone who commits oneself to the demands of maternal practice. The responsibilities of mothering may be taken on not necessarily by the birth mother, but also by other women, such as grandmothers, aunts, and older sisters. African children live with both of their parents (28%) just as often as not living with either parent (27%). They most commonly live with their mother only (42%) and very rarely with their father only (3%) (SAIRR, 2011/2012). It is common to share household with the extended family. Fifty six per cent of Africans live in three generations households (children living with their parent(s), siblings of a parent and cousins and with their grandparents/great aunts or uncles). Skip-generation households (children living with their grandparents or great aunts or uncles and not with their parents) comprise 8% of the households (SAIRR, 2011/2012).

The circumstances of both an increase in women who are becoming involved in the formal labor market and an increase in female-headed households may affect the socialization of children. Of particular interest here is the centrality of the mother's role in children's transition to adulthood.

### **Mothering Adolescents**

The mother's role is powerful for forming identity and psychosocial adjustment of their adolescent children (Bynum & Kotchick, 2006; Kroger, 2000). Although adolescents are exposed to myriad social influences in their search for autonomy (Eriksson, 1968), the mother's role and the institution of the family influences their internalization of values and norms (Davies & Friel, 2001). Most international research has documented the significance of the relationship between the mother and adolescents for healthy developmental outcomes (Biederman, Nichols, & Durham, 2010; Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Townsend, 2008), such as self-esteem (Bynum & Kotchick, 2006; Owens, Scofield & Taylor, 2003) and autonomy (Lawler, 2000). The mother's role has been shown to be very important in creating a sense of sexual agency in daughters (Averett, Benson, & Vaillancourt, 2008). However, according to Lesch and Kruger (2005), African women in South Africa have had poor negotiating power and demonstrated limited sexual agency. A study of African-American mothers indicated that their sense of disempowerment was associated with daughters devaluing their own bodies and not believing that their sexuality was worthy of protecting (Townsend, 2008). Some research indicates that an open communicative relationship with the mother is negatively associated with early sexual debut (Davies & Friel, 2001), unprotected sex (Aronowitz, Rennells, & Todd, 2005), early pregnancy (Owens, et al., 2003) and drug abuse (Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004). However, little is known about the relationship between mothers and their adolescent children in poor communities in post-apartheid South Africa.

Adolescents constitute the first generation growing up in a democratic South Africa. The age group 15–19 years constitutes the largest cohort of the population (Stats SA, 2010a), which means that the majority of the South African population has yet to become mothers and fathers. In this rapidly changing context of family life, knowing more about how parenting norms develop is important. Understanding parenting norms requires

knowing how they are embedded in the broader sociocultural context (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujie, & Uchida, 2002). Parental norms among South African youths can best be assessed by studying “ordinary lives” (Seekings, 2006, p. 1), in which family life and the relationships between parents and adolescents are being played out in everyday surroundings (Shelmerdine, 2006). Gaining insight into African youths’ perceptions about parenthood roles may be useful in planning family policies, especially in the rural provinces.

Our previous sociocultural psychological research on adolescents in the Limpopo Province compared the attitudes of young women towards having children with the attitudes of the mothers’ and the grandmothers’ generations (Spjeldnaes, Sam, Moland, & Peltzer, 2007). We followed this up by studying the norms related to fathering in Limpopo. We explored young men’s experiences of growing up in woman-oriented homes with generally absent men and their aspirations about future fathering (Spjeldnaes, Moland, Harris, & Sam, 2011). Our present study focuses on young women’s and men’s perceptions of the mother’s role in an area where men are generally absent. Similarly to the role of fathers, the role of mothers has varied with history and across cultural and socioeconomic groups. Mothering and the experiences of being mothered thus need to be interpreted in the specific social context of poor, African communities in South Africa, about which there is little knowledge of parental roles today. Drawing on cultural psychology perspectives, this article seeks to explore adolescents’ understanding of the mother’s role in a socioeconomically disadvantaged community in post-apartheid South Africa through the following research questions: How do young men and women experience being mothered? How do young women describe their future aspirations about mothering?

## **METHODS**

We used a phenomenological approach to enable an open and explorative approach to studying young people’s perspectives on mothering in a social context. Phenomenology was a useful approach for exploring the phenomenon of mothering as perceived by the adolescents, since it can capture people’s perceptions of their reality and reflections on their own experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Since phenomenology stays close to the experiences of the participants, it reduces the chance that the researchers are placing their own cultural interpretation. We considered this important, considering the cultural gap between the Norwegian first author and the South African study participants.

### **Study Site**

The study site, Mankweng, is a semiurban area in the Limpopo Province. Limpopo accounts for 11% of the South African population of nearly 50 million (Stats SA, 2010b). The great majority of the Limpopo inhabitants are Africans (97%) (Stats SA, 2010c). The province has among the poorest living conditions in South Africa (Stats SA, 2009). The unemployment rate is high, and labor migration has been rampant since the 20th century. A net out-migration of 141,000 by the end of 2011 was expected (Stats SA, 2010a), and the majority of the population is women from the age of 25 years (Stats SA, 2010c).

Mankweng consists of semiurban townships, villages and informal settlements. The area is situated about 30 kilometers east of the provincial capital, Polokwane. Infrastructure and services are developed. There are 63 secondary schools in the area, all public. School attendance at the national level among Africans 16–20 years old is 72 % (SAIRR, 2011/2012). Most people in Mankweng are of Northern Sotho origin. The Northern Sothos have populated the area since the 1650s (Mönnig, 1967).

## **Participants**

Twenty-two adolescents (13 young men and 9 young women) aged 15–19 years participated. They attended grades 10, 11 or 12 in secondary school. The study participants were of Northern Sotho origin (except for one), belonged to various Christian denominations and defined themselves as lower socioeconomic status.

During childhood, all the participants lived with their mother and siblings. Three young men and one young woman also shared dwellings with their maternal grandmother, aunts or cousins. One man was abandoned by his birth mother at an early age and moved in with his grandmother. Three of the young women grew up with both parents present on a daily basis, but none of the young men lived with a father permanently in childhood. The father was absent because of divorce, labor migration or death. Some participants had never known their father. The presence of a stepfather or an adult male relative was limited.

During adolescence, seven of the young men and three of the young women did not live with their mother on a daily basis anymore. Their mothers had become labor migrants, who returned to Mankweng during weekends or less frequently. Six of the young men were left in the care of their maternal grandmother or aunt, and a domestic worker (a woman employed to carry out household chores) looked after one. Two of the young women were taken care of by their maternal grandmother, and one became the head of household.

## **Procedure**

The South Africa and Tanzania school-based program SATZ<sup>2</sup> enabled access to recruit participants. SATZ researchers selected one of the intervention secondary schools in Mankweng for this study based on the criteria that it should be an average school (a medium-level school in teaching equipment, such as books) with both male and female students. We believed that this type of school could reflect our objective of exploring the lived experiences of adolescents of low socioeconomic status.

We purposively recruited study participants from the selected school of 1111 enrolled students in 2005 based on three criteria: age, sex and diversity of informants. We recruited students in mid-adolescence (15–17 years old) and late adolescence (18–22 years old) based on the idea that mid- and late adolescents could reflect more on their future aspirations than early adolescents (11–14 years old) (Kroger, 2000). We recruited an approximately equal number of men and women to identify possible variation by sex. To keep an open atmosphere and reduce the fear of gossip among focus

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<sup>2</sup> SATZ is developing interventions effective in reducing the transmission of HIV, aiming to change sexual behavior among students in secondary schools.

group participants (Asbury, 1995), we recruited study participants from parallel classes that did not socialize with one another on a daily basis. A research assistant and a teacher at the school ensured that the criteria were met.

The data collection involved focus group discussions (FGDs) (8), photos from the everyday lives of the study participants (19), diaries (21) and semistructured interviews (42). We gathered the data during 2005 and 2007 (Table 1).

In 2005, we collected data for three months. Initially, the first author spent time with the study participants to get to know them and their living surroundings and to develop the topic guides.

First, we carried out three FGDs for young men and three for young women separately to discuss how they viewed the issues of family and reproductive health in the community of Mankweng. Another aim was to get to know the individuals before the interviews. The topic guides included issues related to: family structure, decision-making in a family, reproductive health, HIV and teenage pregnancy. The FGDs had 5–12 participants. Two participants in the first male FGD dropped out and are not included in the total sample.

Second, we used diaries (six among young men and seven among young women) to learn about the everyday life of the participants and plan the interview guide for the individual interviews. We asked the participants to write about their daily life for the following three weeks and gave them a notebook and a pen.

Third, we distributed disposable cameras among ten young men and nine young women and asked them to shoot photographs of people and places they cared about. The rationale was that photos can capture moments of daily life and provide interesting information about the presence or absence of people in the family (White, Bushin, Carpena-Mendez & Ni Laoire, 2010). The photos were planned as an entry point to the individual interviews and to ease the process of following the participants' stories.

Fourth, we conducted semistructured individual interviews among ten young men and nine young women to explore experiences related to the issues raised in the diaries and to complement the information about family norms collected in the FGDs. We initially asked the participants to talk about their photos and diary. Then we brought up the following topics: family life and aspirations about future work, education and children. We conducted the interviews in the school, in the research assistants' home or at the Limpopo University campus; they lasted 40–90 minutes. Information produced in four settings – FGDs, photos and written and oral individual accounts – thus enhanced the interview data on young people's perspectives on mothering.

In 2007, we followed up the study participants over six months. The purpose was to fill in missing information about the family situation for some of the young men and to further explore mothering among both young men and women participants. Five of the young women withdrew because they lacked time, and one young man had migrated from Limpopo. Three new young men were recruited. We required more men than women to saturate the data since the men tended to give shorter and more superficial descriptions.

First, we carried out two FGDs in mixed-sex groups including six participants. Second, we collected diaries from four young men and four young women, whom we asked to make notes of the contact with their father over a period of six months. Third, we carried out semistructured interviews among 12 young men and four young women. The interviews were conducted one to three times with the individual participant, depending on the richness of the data from their first interviews and whether we needed to return for further clarification.

The principles of structure, description and contextualization were key in the phenomenological approach. We explored the understanding of mothering by structuring the topic guides such that the participants could tell about their experiences and aspirations in an open-ended and flexible manner. For example, within the broad question “Could you describe what a typical day is for you?”, we prompted to map the family. We used description through participants telling about their experiences and aspirations through interviews. The FGDs, photographs and diaries offered insight into how their understanding of mothering was embedded in the sociocultural norms and values in the area.

Two experienced research assistants, one man (social worker) and one woman (SATZ researcher), both from Limpopo, moderated the FGDs in the local language of SePedi. The participants could write diaries and be interviewed in either English or SePedi. The participants could choose the interviewer: a SePedi- and English-speaking Northern Sotho man or woman research assistant or the English-speaking Norwegian woman first author.

## **Analysis**

The analysis started during data collection by discussing with the research assistants our immediate impressions of the FGDs and interviews and by writing memos. Four trained assistants and the first author transcribed the tapes from the interviews and the FGDs verbatim. The transcripts in SePedi were translated into English. Then we started the structured analysis of the FGDs, interviews and diaries. We did not analyze the photographs since we primarily used them as an entry for the interviews. We used the software package NVivo for the analysis.

We analyzed interpretations from both the study participant and the researcher according to the steps of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Shinebourne & Smith, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). We chose interpretative phenomenological analysis as the specific approach, since we included both phenomenological (descriptive) and interpretative (analytical) perspectives.

In the first stage of analysis, we read and re-read transcripts of the individually based data to get an overall impression of meaning. We wrote comments on the transcripts in the right-hand margin, aiming to stay close to the text. We then identified emerging themes using the initial notes from the first step of analysis for each participant (Langdridge, 2007). We then clustered themes across all participants, further refined at a conceptual level and organized under overarching, superordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009).

In the second stage, we analysed the FGD data in a top-down group perspective (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). We re-read the transcripts from all the FGDs and made

comments on the group-level data in the margin. We suggested emerging themes about mothering and then interpreted them as conceptual themes.

In the third stage, we analysed the FGDs in a bottom-up individual perspective (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010), paying attention to the individual views on mothering. The analysis enhanced the accounts given in the interviews and diaries. We developed a final set of superordinate and subordinate themes from all the data sources. We checked the emerging themes at the various levels against the original transcripts throughout the process (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3) and further refined them during the writing process.

## **Ethics**

The ethics committee of the University of Limpopo and the Limpopo Provincial Department of Health and Social Development approved the study. Following the procedure of SATZ, the principal of the school signed an informed consent form on behalf of the underage study participants before data was collected. A research assistant introduced the study to the participants and stressed voluntariness and confidentiality. We asked the participants to consent to tape recording before each interview and FGD. We also informed them about their right to withdraw at any time and to refrain from answering any question without explanation. We gave information about how the data would be treated and stored. We explained that the tapes would not be used for other purposes than this study and their accounts would be treated in a way that would not disclose their identity. The participants kept the photos and negatives after the interview; no copies were made. We served fruits and drinks during the FGDs. We gave the participants money as compensation for time at the end of each of the two periods of data collection.

## **RESULTS**

Exploring the adolescents' experiences and expectations of mothering elicited patterns and variation of how mothering was understood in Mankweng. The analysis identified three superordinate themes: responsible mothering, trusting relationships and aspiring responsible motherhood. The data sources (FGD, diary or interview) are indicated in parentheses after the quote.

### **Responsible Mothering**

The adolescents in Mankweng experienced a responsible mother as "being there", providing financially and providing guidance about life and sexuality.

#### ***Being there***

The participants described being there in terms of having a physically or emotionally available mother in daily life. Twelve participants had a mother physically present at home with whom they shared several activities: singing, watching TV, domestic tasks, chatting and shopping. Ten participants did not live with their mother daily because of labor migration, but their mothers were usually home for the weekends. Older sister(s), a maternal aunt or a maternal grandmother looked after the adolescent and sibling(s) during the week.



The adolescents said that they longed for their mother during the weekdays but acknowledged the importance of having a mother who was taking on financial responsibility: "It's just that now she is not around me anymore ..., but I understand that she is responsible" (Young woman 4, FGD).

The participants saw an emotionally available mother as listening, responding and being available to offer support. This meant daily joys, duties and challenges or it could mean just being together, as Young woman 9 put it: "Sometimes we can live and share a moment together" (interview). The adolescents saw their mother as being emotionally unavailable if she was not paying attention to what they had to say or to what was going on around them.

Living together on a daily basis did not necessarily mean that they considered their mother emotionally available. Young woman 7 portrayed a mother working late: "She is a caring mum, she likes talking with me, but sometimes when she is working she doesn't have time to talk, especially when she comes home late. She works too much" (FGD).

Conversely, participants who lived apart from their mother during the week did not necessarily see her as emotionally unavailable. Some indicated that they maintained the close emotional bond by chatting on the telephone and by being together during the weekends. Others longed for the close bond that they used to have: "I miss my mum very much. We were very close before she went" (Young woman 4, Interview). Young man 3, however, had never viewed his mother as being there to offer emotional support.

### ***Providing***

Providing referred to paying school fees, health care, transport, clothes, food, proper housing and leisure activities. The financial responsibility of the mother had increased since the participants became adolescents. The mothers of 11 of the participants were the main providers. The participants with a single mother reported this, but so did those with married parents. A labor migrant father's contribution to the household could be modest. The mothers of 11 participants were joint providers. Their fathers or other relatives also contributed substantially to household income.

Securing a means of living ranged from formal employment in the education and health sectors or commercial activities to informal employment at the street markets. The adolescents accepted and appreciated such income-generating activities, but the mixed-sex FGDs also discussed other ways to make money. One of the young men provoked controversy with the following statement.

Let's say my father is working and earns 5000 rands per month (US\$ 732) and can't send money every month to support the family. My mother will look for someone who can give enough money every month. I will sit with my mother to tell her that I understand if she has an affair, because I would know what she is going through. It will also help me because she will buy food for us, pay school fees, have pocket money and do many things that my father can't do. I don't have a problem. (Man 2, FGD)

Some of the young men accepted their mother looking for support from another man to secure the family income. The young women would not suggest such a "solution" to the household's shortage of money. They were instead concerned about the negative

feelings and what kind of message such a situation could produce: "I won't be happy ... Most people of my age ... It will hurt their feelings" (Young woman 7, FGD).

### ***Guiding the transition to adulthood***

Mothers were described as being either open or silent about sharing information about the transition to adulthood, including social life, future career and issues related to reproductive health: sexuality, pregnancy and HIV.

Openness or silence about reproductive health was widely elaborated on. Sixteen participants described their mother as being open about reproductive health. Their mother was seen as one of their main sources of knowledge about sexuality, pregnancy and HIV. Some of the participants heard about HIV for the first time from her.

The first time I learned about HIV/AIDS was when my mum told me that HIV is a virus that doesn't have a cure yet. It mainly infects people during intercourse but can also be passed with contact with blood and from a pregnant mother to a child, mainly during birth or during breastfeeding. That's what she told me. (Young woman 2, interview)

In attempts to prevent exposure to HIV or sexually transmitted infections, both young men and women reported that their mother could give detailed advice about how to behave in an intimate relationship.

Sometimes she guides me about issues in life – like not being involved in a relationship while still young. If I want to engage in sexual intercourse – what kind of things I can use. She told me that when I want to have sex, I must use things like condoms to avoid issues like teenage pregnancy and diseases. (Young man 2, interview)

Some women described the type of advice their mother gave about postponing sexual intercourse and pregnancy. At times, mothers would go to extremes by instilling fear.

My mum tells me you shouldn't get a baby with a big head. Don't know why, maybe to keep me worried. She tells me that the baby's head will be right here, and if the jeans are tight it will grow big. I asked her "Is birth painful?" Then she said: "Oh, yes, very, very". (Young woman 8, interview)

Both young men and women had been warned about taking advice from peers.

[My mother] helps me with a lot of things. And she also tells me what to do. She guides me. What to do when I am with my friend and when I am "outside". She tells me to take care of myself and don't let my friends give advice. (Young man 4, interview)

The participants could also initiate a discussion: "I talk to her about so many things like if I have question about things I ask her and she answers me and even if I have problems she helps me solve those problems" (Young man 5, interview).

Six participants, young men and women, did not see their mother playing an important role in giving information and advice about reproductive health and sexuality and described her as "silent" and "not open".

The participants were usually positive about receiving advice about reproductive health and sexuality, but some were ambivalent. For example, Young man 1 appreciated that his mother raised the topic: "My mother is so straight. She talks to me about those things"(interview). In contrast, Young man 1 was hesitant about having such a conversation with his mother: "It is too hard to live without a father figure in life,

because you do not know who to talk to as a guy. It is not easy to talk about relationships – actually sexual ones – with your mom” (Young man 1, diary).

The participants who did not receive guidance reacted in various ways. Whereas Young woman 6 longed for a mother who offered her advice, Young woman 4 would be embarrassed to get guidance about sexuality. Other participants seemed satisfied with not getting such information from their mother.

### **Trusting Relationships**

When a mother was perceived as responsible, this shaped a trusting relationship. Trusting relationships developed when the mother became a confidant in whom the participants felt that they could tell her things and confide, knowing that she would keep a secret. The most frequent answer to the direct question of whom you trust most in your life was “my mother” among both men and women.

I trust my mother because it’s normal for a person to trust their mother. She has been taking care of me, and she is a person who has always been in my life. I know her and she knows me. So it’s easy to tell her things and put my trust in her. (Young man 3, interview)

The everyday physical and emotional availability of their mother in the household through childhood seemed significant. She was the person who knew them best and to whom they felt close. Young man 6 explained that he preferred sharing problems with his mother instead of his father: “I only share my problems with my mother, because my mother knows me better than my father does” (interview). If their mother had migrated for work and was not as available as before, it did not seem to interfere in their sense of trust. Young man 3, however, who was abandoned by his mother, did not interpret their relationship as filled with trust.

A trusting relationship also implied that their mother became a role model. Young man 4 explained why: my mother is my role model because she looks after her children. I want to do the same thing (interview). Their mothers’ hard-working and financially independent ways of living were also ideals. Mothers were expected to be role models for responsible behavior.

When that man leaves, I will talk to my mother; “What are you doing? Are you a responsible mother? What are you trying to teach me while I am still a child?” I will ask her what kind of mother am I going to be in the future? (Young woman 6, FGD)

### **Aspiring to Responsible Motherhood**

The women’s aspirations about the mother’s role were about planning in advance and about managing the role through being there, providing financially and guiding.

#### ***Planning the timing of and the number of children***

All the women aspired to have children in the future. Becoming a responsible mother meant planning the timing of and the number of children. The timing of having children seemed to be based on two conditions: (a) securing a job after completing education and

(b) getting married. The women wanted to have their first child in their mid- or late twenties and some at age 30 years. Young woman 7 imagined the order of future life events: "Finish school and get a job. When I get a job I will have a caring man, and he must be responsible ... I will have a child at the age of 26" (FGD). Finding a caring and responsible husband was a major concern, referring to a man who should be "stable and not running away from his family" and who "took his share of domestic tasks".

Having a child before these conditions were met was commonly considered acting irresponsibly and seen as lost youth and lost future. The FGDs vigorously discussed teenage motherhood.

There is this girl ... who has a child, and she is my age and then she cannot afford to meet the needs of her child; she doesn't look after that baby. The grandmother is the one to take care. Actually, she sometimes leaves the baby at home alone. ... Actually it's like she doesn't know what a baby is. (Young woman 4, FGD)

This young mother was viewed as not being able to care for her child. Further, Young woman 6 thought that raising a child without a father was irresponsible.

Imagine raising a child without responsibility – without a father – so that the child will do the same? Imagine how the children of your children are going to be raised – are they also going to be raised without responsible parents? (Young woman 9, FGD)

Some of the FGD participants would not negotiate the timing of having a child. Young woman 6 said: "I will get an abortion because I want to achieve my goals." Young woman 3 said that adoption was a valid alternative: "You could have given up the baby for adoption and separated from the baby. Everything, but not killing." Other FGD participants, such as Young woman 9, were willing to give up their ideal of completing education if the pregnancy was mistimed: "I don't know if it's the only baby I will get, so to me abortion would be wrong, and I will raise the child."

Deciding on the number of children was important in planning responsible mothering. It was common to aspire to having "a limited number of children", meaning two or three:

I only have two hands – I think two children are enough ... I'll make sure that they have everything they want. Imagine if I have 10 children and earning only for five. It will not cover all 10 children. (Young woman 3, interview)

Young woman 3 described in the interview that she planned to have two children, because she was not sure whether she would be able to take financial responsibility for more children. Young woman 8, however, differed from the common view in aspiring for 11 children.

### ***Being there, providing and guiding***

Managing the mother's role referred to what kinds of responsibilities the adolescent women saw as important and how they wanted to manage them.

The FGDs widely discussed being there for their children both physically and emotionally. They generally agreed that a mother should spend time with her small child or children on a daily basis.

A responsible mother is a mother who doesn't run away from her child and who knows her baby's likes and dislikes, what the baby does and doesn't do, and who doesn't just hear her mother

saying: "Your baby can walk." One day it comes as a surprise that your child is walking. So the child grows up not knowing you and you not knowing your child. I don't like that one. (Young woman 6, FGD)

The women did not want to leave this responsibility to their mother or a nanny, because that would remove them from their child. Following the developmental steps closely and learning to know their child well would be difficult. Creating a bond in the early years required daily physical contact: "I think the most important thing in raising a child is to have a bond between the child and the parent, not just leave the child with the grandmother, because you need to maintain the bond" (Young woman 4, FGD).

Most of the women viewed providing financially for their children as a joint responsibility, shared with a (future) husband. Young woman 2, however, had a different perspective: "I don't know how it will turn out, but I would prefer to not get married and to raise my children as a single parent" (FGD). To some of the women, providing was not only seen as a breadwinner activity but could also present opportunities for making a career and for self-realization: "The child must not stop me from proceeding with my career" (Young woman 2, interview).

The participants considered providing guidance on reproductive health and sexuality a main task of mothering. The FGD participants often expressed that a mother should "be open" about giving advice and information about sexuality, pregnancy, contraception and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV: "I want to be a mother who loves her children and talk openly with them so that I can protect them from falling sick" (Young woman 9, FGD). "Being open" also implied that the daughter or son would dare to initiate a conversation.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study shed light on young people's understanding of mothering in an economically disadvantaged area in a transitional South Africa. The analysis identified three superordinate themes: responsible mothering, trusting relationships and aspiring to responsible motherhood. The themes will be discussed in relation to gender and family change.

### **Responsible Mothering in a Gendered Perspective**

The adolescents' understanding of mothering focused on taking on responsibilities. Responsible mothering was manifested in terms of what the mother actually did in relation to them by "being there" physically and/or emotionally, taking main or joint financial provider responsibility and being open or silent about the transition to adulthood. Responsible mothering shaped a trusting relationship. Both the young men and women communicated very clearly what their mother meant to them. A mother did not necessarily need to take on all the responsibilities attached to the mother's role at all times. They could negotiate some responsibilities in ways that maintained a positive relationship to their children.

Being there physically on a daily basis was primarily important in childhood. In adolescence, a mother who was absent because of being a labor migrant could be longed for, but the participants acknowledged her financial responsibility and accepted her

absence. Other women could be available in the house on a daily basis, which reflected long traditions of collective mothering in the Northern Sotho culture (Mönnig, 1967). The emotional presence of their mother, however, was of utmost importance in adolescence, because it implied opportunities for open and trusting communication in their transition to adulthood.

Both men and women participants acknowledged mothers' financial responsibility, but the discussions revealed some interesting gender differences. The men could accept their mother basing her provider responsibility on financial support from a lover, but the women could not. The women would question the value of the advice from their mother about men and sexuality. Accepting such a situation would take a toll on the trusting relationship.

Guiding adolescent daughters may be viewed in the light of both custom and the current health situation in Limpopo. In the Northern Sotho culture, women did typically not assume the main responsibility for income-generating activities. Older women were appointed as mentors to adolescents in their transition to womanhood (Mönnig, 1967). This custom of women in the family or the community is important to maintain in the advent of the HIV epidemic. Considering the dubious quality of the teaching related to HIV and sexually transmitted infections in secondary schools in Mankweng (Helleve, Flisher, Onya, Mukoma, & Klepp, 2009), advice from women or a mother may indeed be significant for adolescent women. Research in the United States stresses the role of the mother in armoring their daughters against HIV (Aronowitz et al., 2005; Davies & Friel, 2001; Turnbull, Van Wersch, & Van Schaik, 2008). The mother's role is especially key for adolescents in female-oriented African-American communities (Hong, 2009; Stevens, 2002). However, the role modeling of a mother may be debated in poor communities, in which women tend to have limited sexual agency (Lesch & Kruger, 2005). This may negatively influence their daughters' sense of power and decision-making in a sexual relationship (Townsend, 2008).

The young men did not seem to similarly emphasize open and trusting communication with their mother in the transition to adulthood. They considered their mother to be responsible even if guidance and role modeling could lose value given how their mother negotiated income-generating activities. Finding that adolescent men may put higher priority on financial responsibility may be a sign of powerlessness in an impoverished community. It may also signal that the men do not acknowledge the value of the advice from their mother or may indicate that they found it awkward to interact with their mother or other women in the family about sensitive topics. However, reproductive health promotion emphasizes the advisory role of a mother, also in relation to adolescent sons (Aronowitz et al., 2005; Davies & Friel, 2001; Turnbull et al., 2008). The mother and other adult women may in fact be especially key in boys' transition to adulthood in present-day Mankweng, where fathers are generally absent. In this situation, the mother may be an important but neglected source of information, also for the youngmen, who may be left out of vital communication about such topics as preventing HIV infection. This corresponds with findings from studies in the Western Cape, South Africa (Lesch & Kruger, 2005) and the United States (Averett et al., 2008; Davies & Friel, 2001; Townsend, 2008).

### **Towards a Gender-Equitable Ideal of Family Life**

The aspirations of the adolescent women about responsible mothering were related to managing responsibilities both similarly and differently to their mothers. Similarly to how some of the women were mothered, they emphasized daily presence in childhood, financial contributions and guidance on reproductive health. How the adolescent women wanted to manage these responsibilities differed from their experiences. Planning before becoming a mother was of great concern. As seen in previous research among adolescent girls and women in the Limpopo Province, the participants said that marriage and motherhood should ideally be postponed until education and employment are secured (Spjeldnaes et al., 2007). Such timing of mothering differs from the traditions in the Northern Sotho culture, in which womanhood has been seen as equivalent to motherhood (Mönnig, 1967). Even if mothers were engaged in small-scale income-generating activities several decades back, the responsibility for earning money has traditionally been associated with the role of the man in rural South Africa (Muthwa, 1994). The adolescent women in present-day Mankweng view motherhood and womanhood differently. Womanhood seems to be idealized both in terms of having children and a career, which require that a husband and wife make childrearing into a joint project. Making a professional career is the kind of role model to which these women aspire. Their aspirations also create clear expectations towards the role of the father and gender equality.

Spjeldnaes et al. (2011) found that the aspirations of young men in Mankweng towards the father's role differ greatly from their experiences with their fathers. Most longed to have a father who was present and involved in their daily activities. Their aspirations to be present for and to guide their children in daily life to deal with sensitive issues such as HIV represented more a radical change than a reproduction of their experiences of being fathered. The young men's ideals were more similar to their experiences with their mothers. Daily care and domestic chores should be shared with a wife, who should have a professional career. Thus, their future aspirations about family life seem in harmony with the ideals of the young women in Mankweng.

These young men and women may have similar parenthood agendas because of their experiences of growing up in single-mother homes. Societal influences such as increased awareness of gender equity and the cultural ideal of a dual-earner family (Akande et al., 2006) may also influence this idea. Formal employment has become more common for women (Lubbe, 2007), and masculine identities are changing in South Africa (Morrell, 2006). The discourse on "new fatherhood", emphasizing emotional presence, is gaining prominence (Roy, 2008).

Structural constraints in Limpopo and South Africa may challenge the aspirations of these men and women about a dual-earner family. The high rate of unemployment in rural South Africa (Stats SA, 2007) may maintain the situation of labor migration, absence of fathers and female-oriented homes. Further, early and unplanned motherhood is common (Mkhwanzi, 2010), which contradicts the plans of the young women and interferes with the kind of role model they want to become. The increased number of divorces and single mothers in South Africa may interrupt their ideal of making childrearing a joint project of a husband and wife. These obstacles may create a situation in which the adolescent men and women may end up repeating the same life history, because they do not have the agency to do this differently in their local environment.

The disempowering situation of not having the opportunity to realize their parental ideals may be viewed in the light of why adolescents of low socioeconomic status expressed a sense of meaninglessness about opportunities in South Africa (Morojele & Brook, 2004). The gap between aspirations and reality indicates that individual aspirations are currently insufficient to enable change at the societal level (Hutson, 2008, p. 84).

### **Methodological Considerations**

Representing the concept of motherhood through the eyes of adolescents in a different culture is a challenging task and requires careful methodological and ethical considerations. The study has several weaknesses. The foreknowledge of the authors may have influenced data collection and analysis. The authors are from Norway, the United States and Ghana, which represent different socioeconomic backgrounds than Mankweng. This required awareness of our own presuppositions about family life and gender equity. Knowing that the presence of the researcher is significant for the responses of the study participants (Kvale, 1996), we aimed to take a conscious, reflexive attitude about our own position, the questions being asked and the methods being used (Langdridge, 2007). The presence of the first author during the data collection may have affected the data produced, and the data might have been different if researchers inside the community collected them. Another weakness of the study is language. The first author did not speak the mother tongue of the participants, and the views of the participants thus become less available. The sampling procedure excluded young people who did not attend school.

Some of the participants dropped out when the follow-up study was initiated. Another issue is the debate about the multi-voiced nature of FGDs being used in phenomenological approaches, which strongly emphasizes an idiographic focus (Palmer, Larkin, De Visser, & Fadden, 2010).

An institution in a high-income country funded this study, which may have shaped expectations about financial compensation. We made efforts to reduce such expectations. The research assistant, who introduced the study, emphasized that it was a low-budget dissertation study, and payment could not be expected.

To counter the weaknesses, different perspectives were sought and triangulation was used both in terms of data sources (FGDs, interviews and diaries) and in interpreting the findings. The perspectives of the Northern Sotho research assistants during the data collection and the perspectives of the co-authors during analysis and write-up stimulated reflexivity. Further, a follow-up study was initiated in 2007 to fill in missing information and further explore the issues raised in the original study in 2005.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this study show that adolescent men and women in Mankweng understood mothering in terms of responsibility and trust. The adolescents reported predominantly positive experiences of being mothered and expressed great trust in their own mothers. Adolescent men and women agreed on the characteristics of responsible mothering, but weighed the importance of each of the characteristics differently. Whereas guidance and role modeling was most important to the women, providing and financial supply seemed to be most important to the men. The women



built their aspirations for future mothering referring to their own experiences of being mothered and to their mothers as role models. This illustrates how the institution of the family remains one of our most salient and enduring social institutions (Lubbe, 2007). Earlier research in the area (Spjeldnaes, et al., 2011) indicated that adolescent boys shared views about gender equality in the family with the adolescent women in this study. Although hard to implement in a context of impoverishment and unemployment, the existence of these shared ideals about parenting among adolescent women and men represent an important departure from research on traditional ideologies of gender roles and family life in Mankweng.

Table 1

Data Collection in 2005 and 2007

	Data Collection in 2005				Follow-up in 2007		
	FGD	Diaries	Instant development cameras	Interviews	FGD sessions	Diaries	Interviews
Young Men (n = 13)	3 sessions	6	10	10		4	12
Young Women (n = 9)	3 sessions	7	9	9		4	4
Total (n = 22)	6	13	19	19	2 sessions <sup>a</sup>	8	16

<sup>a</sup>Mixed-sex sessions

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