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# Reflections on parenting practices that impact child-rearing in a low-income community

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*Parenting plays an important role in the socialisation of children and youth, and ineffective parenting has been associated with multiple negative social and health outcomes among young people. Any attempt to design contextually relevant multi-system interventions to improve parenting practices and reduce negative child and adolescent outcomes must be based on an understanding of how contextual factors influence parenting practices. A phenomenological reflective lifeworld approach was utilised to explore parents' lived experiences of multiple intersecting socio-demographic factors and community social processes that impact on their parenting practices. This study was framed by social disorganisation theory rooted within an ecological framework. Using purposive sampling, data was collected from 47 parents comprising local residents and stakeholders (36 focus group participants and 7 individual interview participants) in a low-income community in Cape Town, South Africa. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed various socio-demographic factors characteristic of community disorder that intersect with parenting and contributes to neglectful parenting. These factors include socio-economic disadvantage that leads to parental stress for predominantly single parent families, and a lack of formal and informal social control compounded by community disorder. This highlights the need for multi-level parenting interventions that address both community structural and social processes.*

**Keywords:** parenting practices; South Africa; family structure; social disorganisation theory

## **INTRODUCTION**

Parenting plays an important role in the socialisation of children and adolescents. Ineffective parenting has been associated with multiple negative social and health outcomes, including child and adolescent negative emotionality (Haller & Chassin, 2011); delinquency, violence, anti-social behaviour (Cooper, De Lannoy & Rule, 2015); substance abuse problems (see Pears, Capaldi & Owen, 2007) and various health disparities (see Ventura & Birch, 2008). A large corpus of research focuses on the consequences of negative parenting practices and the impact and outcomes of parenting interventions within contexts outside of Africa (see Power et al, 2013; Scott et al, 2014). Little research has been done on parental perceptions regarding contextual factors that impact parenting practices within low-income communities within South Africa. Given the complexities and dynamic nature of family structures, and compositional features and community social processes within a South African context, one cannot generalise from one community to the next, much less from other contexts to a South African context. Attempts to design contextually relevant multi-system interventions focusing on improving parenting practices and reducing negative child and adolescent outcomes must be based on an understanding of how the aforementioned features and processes influence parenting. Thus, in light of this paucity in the South African context, the need exists to explore contextual factors that affect parenting practices within low-income South African communities that will inform contextually relevant interventions.

Approximately 85,000 children (0.5%) in South Africa are reared in a total of 61,000 child-headed households (Meintjies, Hall & Sambu, 2015), which has been ascribed to challenges such as HIV/AIDS and violence (UNICEF, 2013). A child-headed household can be regarded as one in which a child (under 18 years) within the household has assumed the primary responsibility for the household due to parental or caregiver absence or when parents or primary caregivers are present, but are unable to provide the

required care due to illness and substance abuse problems (Mogotlane, Chauke, Van Rensburg, Human & Kgakga, 2010). Often children heading the household are not at school due to domestic responsibilities (Mogotlane et al, 2010). Studies found that 23% of women in 2008, and 13,9% of women in 2016 who gave birth in South Africa were under the age of 20 which has led to poorer health and educational outcomes for children (Menendez, Branson, Lam, Ardington & Leibbrandt, 2014; Stats SA, Recorded Live Births Report, 2017).

## **BI-DIRECTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTING PRACTICES AND MULTIPLE SYSTEMS**

Parenting practices are complex and thus may be influenced by various interacting factors including individual, relationship, community and broader societal factors. Power et al. (2013: 90) contend that there is a parent-centric bias in the traditional notion of what constitutes parenting, i.e. 'the act of raising children'. Alluding to what they call 'taming the parents', Power and colleagues highlight the bi-directional relationship between parent and child. That is, just as characteristics and behaviours of parents can evoke particular child behaviours, so too behaviour of children can engender different parental responses (Shaffer, Lindheim, Kolko & Trentacosta, 2014). O'Conner (2002) postulates that this reciprocal relationship is demonstrated in the bi-directional transaction that take place in situations where a parent may respond with altered tolerance to problem behaviours in a child due to the parent's own misery or anxieties, which are often triggered by community disorder. Various studies highlight the importance of considering the bi-directional interaction between systems at several levels, such as parenting on child behaviour and vice versa, peer relationships, and socio-demographic factors in addressing parent-child outcomes (Burke, Pardini, & Loeber, 2008; Hipwell et al, 2008; Shaffer et al, 2014).

Individual level factors that affect parenting and that have been associated with negative child and youth outcomes include parental substance misuse and parental psycho-emotional challenges. A number of studies have shown that parental alcohol and drug abuse contribute to impaired parenting skills (Bailey et al, 2013), reduced levels of parental monitoring and supervision (Latendresse et al, 2008), school failure, and behavioural problems (Lander, Howsare & Byrne, 2013). Bailey et al. (2013) found that parent personality factors, particularly negative emotionality, influences parents' own problem behaviours and their relations and interactions with their children.

Contextual factors that impact parenting practices and styles within South Africa not only include dislocated and unsettled families due to absent or disengaged fathers or death of both parents, but also low socio-economic circumstances (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Disadvantaged communities are commonly characterised by excessive poverty, unemployment, violence, crime and diminished levels of community cohesion (Callahan, Scaramella, Laird & Sohr-Preston, 2011). High rates of delinquency and youth violence have been found to be a common occurrence in communities characterised by structural and socio-economic disadvantage (see Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Elevated levels of deviant behaviour in a community in turn diminishes parental control (parental behaviour intended to guide the child's behaviour) and thus the deterrent effect of caretaker control on youth conduct problems becomes lesser (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell & Dintcheff, 2006; Simons, Chau, Conger & Elder, 2001).

Even though parenting is a strong predictor of child psychosocial adjustment, and the need for understanding the link between community contexts and parenting practices have been highlighted, contextual factors related to parenting style and parenting practices itself are not well understood and merits further empirical exploration (Cuellar, Jones & Sterret, 2015). However, Kotchnick and Forehand (2002) argue that parenting programmes frequently function as if the family exists in a vacuum, often not taking into account the factors that could contribute to the development and manifestation of parenting practices themselves. Developing contextually relevant interventions necessitates an understanding of how social disorganisation impacts on parenting and how parenting practices, in turn, contribute to negative behavioural outcomes among young people. Social disorganisation theory postulates that communities with limited economic and social resources lack conventional community social controls which not only leads to the escalation of criminal behaviour and delinquency and further social and economic breakdown (Brenner, Bauermeister & Zimmerman, 2011; Sampson & Groves 1989), but also strains parental resources, resulting in negative parenting practices.

In lieu of the aforementioned, and in order to inform contextually relevant interventions, the aim of this paper is to explore parental perceptions regarding factors that affect parenting practices in a low-income community context.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This article is framed by Sampson and Groves (1989) integrated conceptualisation of social disorganisation within an ecological framework. Social disorganisation theory hypothesises that structural features, such as socio-economic disadvantage, disrupt community social organisation processes, leading to social disorganisation. For example, communities with limited economic and social resources lack conventional community social controls which, lead to the escalation of criminal behaviour and delinquency and further social and economic breakdown (Brenner, Bauermeister & Zimmerman, 2011; Knoester & Haynie, 2005; Sampson & Groves, 1989). The community structure thus fails to achieve common values of members to uphold effective social control. Community structure pertains to the compositional or socio-demographic characteristics of communities, such as maternal age and income level, and community social processes pertain to the social organisation of communities (e.g., social connections among neighbours) generally assessed through perceptions of residents on how communities function (Chung & Steinberg, 2006: 319).

Kubrin and Wo (2016) emphasise that the structural dimension of social disorganisation can be determined by the prevalence and interdependence of both formal (e.g. organisational participation) and informal (e.g. friendship ties) social networks in a community and through the extent of collective actions to addressing local challenges. The social disorganisation approach is rooted in systems theory that views the local community as a complex system of kinship, friendship and networks as well as formal and informal connections embedded in family life and continuing socialisation processes (Kubrin & Wo, 2016). The congruity between systems and social disorganisation theory is found in their shared supposition that structural barriers hamper the development of both formal and informal ties or connections that enhance the capacity to solve common problems.

In sum, social disorganisation occurs when certain factors and ecological characteristics of communities, disrupt the social organisation of a community, and in turn impede the development of social ties, diminish social control, influence parenting practices, and child outcomes. Understanding these, bi-directional processes are thus important for developing contextually relevant interventions.

## RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Rolock, Jantz and Abner (2015) emphasise the importance of understanding how community disorder intersects with parent-child relationships, parenting practices and child outcomes in the development of effective community level interventions. The primary aim of this article is to understand the intersection of social disorganisation with parenting practices and how these practices, in turn, contribute to negative child and youth outcomes in disorganised communities. The specific objectives of this paper are twofold:

- 1) To explore parental perceptions regarding factors that affect parenting practices in a low-income community context, and
- 2) To understand the intersections between the harmful effects of community disorganisation in relation to parenting and child and youth behaviour

## METHOD

### Research approach

The study employed a phenomenological reflective lifeworld approach to explore parents' account of their lived experiences (Dahlberg et al, 2008). This approach foregrounds the importance of considering that human beings are central actors in composing their (life) worlds and as such are continuously engaged in 'constructing, developing, and changing the everyday (common sense) interpretations of their world(s) (Babbie & Mouton, 2006: 28). Proponents of this approach posit that there are certain essential features of the life world, namely identity, embodiment, sociality, temporality, spatiality and discourse (Ashworth, 2003) which are always linked to an individual's experience. These interlinked 'fractions' (Ashworth, 2003) act as a lens through which to view the data. From this point of view, everyday life in disadvantaged communities must be understood in terms of explaining the complexities of the lived experiences from the perspective of parents, caregivers and Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers.

### Research setting

The study was conducted in a peri-urban, low-income coastal town situated in the Helderberg basin in the Western Cape, 4km outside of Strand. It is a predominantly Afrikaans speaking community and in the

Apartheid era would have been classified a ‘Coloured’<sup>1</sup> community. The community consists of approximately 8234 residents of which 2700 are children and 5534 are adults. This community is characterised by a high rate of unemployment, minimal infrastructure, with 16% of the residents living in informal dwellings and high incidence of both intentional and unintentional injuries (Van Niekerk & Ismail, 2013).

### **Sampling and procedure**

A total of 47 purposively recruited local residents, comprising 36 participants (25 females and 11 males) in 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and 11 individual interview participants (10 females and 1 male) participated in the study. Inclusion criteria for the individual interviews were caregivers/parents who were not involved in intervention campaigns held in their community. For the FGDs, the spectrum of participants was broader, including community stakeholders, ECD teachers, as well as parents in the community. We identified participants with the support of community interventionists and invited participants on an individual basis, delineating the research aims, our expectations for involvement and ethical issues relating to participation. All data from the interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded with permission from the participants, downloaded onto the computer, translated into English and transcribed to prepare for data analysis.

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee and thereafter, signed informed consent, and permission to audio-record interviews and FGDs were obtained from research participants. Semi-structured interview and FGD schedules were utilised to explore participants’ perceptions of the factors that affect parenting practices within a context of social disorganisation. Interviews consisted of an interviewer and a co-interviewer and ranged from 50 to 80 minutes. After the individual interviews were conducted, three focus-group interviews were held with groups of eleven parents.

### **Data analysis**

The analysis of data is based on the framework described by Dahlberg and colleagues (2008) and aims to explore the essential structure of community disorder, parenting and the parent-child relationship in a low-income community. The first phase of analysis focused on attaining an overall sense of the data, while the subsequent phases represented a deeper analysis to uncover the richness, meanings and variations of the data (Dahlberg et al, 2008). Triangulation was achieved by utilising numerous approaches: 1) combining interview and focus group data; 2) employing more than one researcher in this study to gather and interpret data in order to achieve inter-subjective agreement; and 3) combining theories to interpret the data (Cresswell, 2007). Rigour was enhanced by two authors conducting a first and second order analysis respectively to identify the most salient themes and synchronising the findings. The phenomenological approach pursued within a social disorganisation systemic framework enabled the researchers to critically and holistically explore community structural constraints and community social processes that impact parenting practices.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Community influences are important factors to take into account when considering parenting behaviours and child and youth behavioural outcomes. The following salient themes emerged as contributing to negative parenting practices: (1) community disorder, (2) socioeconomic disadvantage, (3) family structure, (4) parental monitoring and support, and (5) formal and informal social networks.

### **Community disorder**

Participants identified various forms of disorder within the community, that contributes to parental stress and negative parenting practices. The substantial peddling of alcohol and other drugs in the community was acknowledged as a normal occurrence, placing children in danger and undermines parenting practices. Participants viewed drugs as *‘a terrible evil... in this community’* stating that *‘you try to the best of your ability to protect your children, but once they are outside in the community, then it is a difficult challenge with wrong friends, drugs...’* (FGD 3).

Others noted that substance misuse was often role modelled in the home by parents *‘drinking and smoking marijuana in front of children’* (Interview 1). Participants noted the presence of drug outlets that are in close proximity to children further exacerbate the situation: *‘Next to us (the crèche) is ... a place where*

*drugs are sold*' (Interview 1), and *'children are actually a big target ... drug dealers... putting major pressure on children'* (Interview 5). Participants felt that due to the excessive peddling and presence of drugs in the community *'more parents are drunk, [and] they don't worry about their children'* (Interview 4), which lead to neglectful parenting practices and elevated levels of violence.

One participant noted that *'Friday evenings are when there is a lot of violence in this community because the mother and the father both do drugs or drink then they fight'* (Interview 3). Children are thus exposed to domestic violence which, was also ascribed to overcrowding and sharing a house with extended family members: *'A lot of fighting, disagreement between mommy, daddy and many brothers who live together. Then the children must observe that ...'* (Interview 7). Other research has shown that overcrowding lead to a lack of privacy, undermining children's needs and rights and placing them at greater risk of sexual abuse (see Hall, 2010).

Parents experienced a sense of helplessness and loss of control over their children because *'gangsters ... influence the life of ... [the] younger generation, ... they are more like the role models of today, they got all the power ... because if you as a parent... just trying to reason with this kind of thing then... it just trying to fight you... trying to push you down'* (FGD 1). They experience the gangsters as having greater power and influence over their children.

The study has revealed that children in this community are socialised in an environment where factors associated with community disorganisation are common occurrences (see Swart, Seedat & Nel, 2015). This includes the misuse of substances, the abundant presence of informal liquor outlets and open peddling of drugs, gangsterism, violence, and spatial impediments. These factors are further compounded, by parental display of violence and misuse of substances. Parenting thus occurs in context and can therefore, not be understood in isolation from the environment within which it occurs. Other studies have shown that living in a community with elevated levels of disorder can make it challenging to parent children and contributes to parental stress and more reactive parenting practices (Lamis, Wilson, Tarantino, Lansford & Kaslow, 2014). Simons et al. (2001) looked at community context and found that the deterrent effect of caretaker control on conduct problems decreases as deviant behaviour becomes more widespread in the community. One can thus surmise that since high levels of disorganisation weakens or diminishes parental control, it is difficult to maintain parental boundaries. In such situations, parents often feel frustrated and powerless, which lead to negative interactions with children, such as the propensity to impulsively react in order to establish instantaneous control (Burnett, no date). Reactive parenting, in turn, can generate feelings of resentment, anger, and antagonism towards parents, which interferes with children's appropriate internalisation of control, which then lead to aggressive child behaviour (Gao, Zhang & Fung, 2015). This demonstrates the bi-directional transaction that take place in situations where a parent may respond with altered tolerance to problem behaviours' because of social disorganisation in the community.

### **Socio-economic disadvantage**

Seabrook (2013) contends that effective parenting is contingent on the socio-economic status of a family, and argues that economic insecurity diminishes the quality of children's physical surroundings, the skills that parents can impart to their children, and the arising increased parental stress, which affects parent-child relationship. Participants highlighted the link between parental neglect and low socio-economic status stating: *'This place that we stay in is not well developed... There are poor people that have absolutely nothing, and that is where it comes in, where the parents don't worry - then some parents have nothing in the house to give to the child. Then they stress and the parent don't worry ... I think this is where it comes in where we as parents don't worry because we constantly have stress with us'*. (Interview 2). Since parents should provide for their children, their overwhelming socio-economic circumstances and the accompanying stress lead to a sense of parental disengagement as a coping mechanism. The demands of parenting for young single parents and the accompanying stress are even greater. One participant stated: *'Sometimes they [the mothers] are discouraged; one can see it they are disheartened but they continue' and they become despondent, many of them... I now stood again at the hospital. This is the second time that she took tablets. It looks like she can't take the pressure ... They are all in their twenties, understand'* (Interview 7). The helplessness of the situation single parents find themselves in, and the despondency often leads to suicidal attempts. Single mothers thus experience higher rates of stress and depression in comparison to married women (see Cairney, Boyle, Offord & Racine, 2003).

Unemployment, in particular amongst males, was widespread in this community. *'Unemployment is a huge issue, especially for men'* (Interview 7). One participant noted that *'sometimes the wife works alone*

*and the man don't work*'. What emerged in the ensuing discussion was that men tended to accept their fate because of their inability to provide for their family due to unemployment, which makes them despondent and resort to substances. They therefore become disengaged from their familial responsibilities: *'It's almost like they don't care anymore [that they don't work] man, they are in that stage of I don't care, she must just go work and that is it'* (Interview 7).

Participants highlighted that when the men are unemployed they resort to alcohol and other substances, which are regarded as possible explanations for child neglect and /or abandonment (see Lansford, Deter-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2004). *'Drugs come in, drugs, alcohol abuse - that is also part of it. Many of them ... the mommy went to work, the daddy is at home; the child screams; the child don't have bread because daddy does not care...'* (Interview 1). Male unemployment thus has various debilitating consequences for parenting which highlights the importance of parenting interventions focusing on the relationship between masculinity challenges and unemployment.

Studies have shown that families who face socio-economic disadvantage tend to make use of more authoritarian parenting practices (underscoring obedience, conformity and complying with rules) as a means to protect their children (Baumrind, Larzelere & Owens, 2010). However, participants in this study stated that socio-economic disadvantage in this community contributes to neglectful parenting practices or uninvolved parenting styles: *'Some of the parents, there may be one or two children and they can't afford the day care centres and then ... that small child of two, three years are running up and down here on their own'* (FGD 1). Often single parents, struggling to make ends meet, tended to neglect their children because of the necessity of providing for a family as indicated in the following quote: *'sometimes there are children ... in the park... The mommy went to do domestic work so she left the child alone'* (FGD 3), and *'the mother does not always have time for that children because she now has to work. She is now the mother and the father'* (Interview 7). The economic constraints that single mothers face therefore encroach on their parenting practices (see Knoester & Haynie, 2005). Another participant stated: *'The parents themselves of these children, they don't treat the children as they should be treated and education they don't also get... they don't spend much time with the children'* (Interview 6). Poverty, family structure, and low-socio-economic status thus contribute to uninvolved and disengaged parenting, neglect of children's socio-emotional needs, and overall parental responsibility in child rearing (see Baumrind et al, 2010; Brenner et al, 2011). Low socio-economic status diminishes 'the capacity for supportive, consistent, and involved parenting' which in turn 'affect children indirectly through their impact on the parents' behaviour toward the child' (McLoyd 1990: 312). These findings are congruent with findings in other low-income contexts. The outcomes of poverty and economic loss on parental behaviour and family processes and how these, in turn, impair the socio-emotional functioning of children residing in poor communities. She emphasises that 'poverty and economic loss diminish the capacity for supportive, consistent, and involved parenting' and concluded that 'economic loss and poverty affect children indirectly through their impact on the parents' behaviour toward the child (McLoyd, 1990: 312). She found that low socio-economic status is directly linked to diminished parental expression of affection and reduced responsiveness to the child's socio-emotional needs. Similar results have been reported by Brenner and colleagues (2011).

### **Family structure**

There are many female-headed single-parent families within the community of interest, resulting in large numbers of children growing up with absent fathers. One participant noted that *'most of the mothers are single'* (Interview 4) in the community. Another participant indicated: *'In my street is a lot of people whose father isn't there - it's only the mum. Most of these houses, it's only the mother is working and actually they have three or four daughters and out of those four daughters two have babies and how did they survive?'* (FGD 2).

The ramifications of being a single parent can have far-reaching effects on both parenting practices and child and youth outcomes. One participant stressed the impact of becoming a single parent when her husband left: *'Because of it, I could not keep up with the school fees. So, my eldest daughter left school, and then the second child also left school ... [and the eldest child] had a baby... three of my children left school'* (Interview 4). A teacher indicated that many children at her crèche come from single-parent homes and the responsibility for these children is often left to older siblings: *'I have a lot of single parents [whose children attend the crèche] ... There are instances where children stay by the older brother ... and these are girl children'* (Interview 7). The demands and financial constraints of single-parenthood therefore

contribute to lower educational outcomes for children as well as teenage pregnancies, which have been found to disrupt family and community functioning and deleteriously influence the rearing and development of children (Motihar, 2007). Participants highlighted that *'Teenage pregnancy is a problem in [this] community... and teenage girls who fall pregnant rarely go back to school to finish their education'* (FGD 1). Existing evidence indicate that women who experience higher levels of parenting difficulties are younger in age and have lower educational attainment (Fox, Platz & Bentley, 1995). Being a single parent with no parenting skills at an age where these teen mothers themselves needing parental guidance, often grappling with poverty, renders them ill equipped to parent. Participants stated that: *'One of the problems is the lack of understanding, especially amongst the youth, because you know to have a child is a huge responsibility and there is financial implications... parenting implications because most of the youngsters that have children are not ready to be a parent which means the children themselves (i.e. teen parents), they still need to be cared for by their parents and be guarded by parents, they still haven't discovered their own identity'*. (FGD3)

It appears from the above, that being trapped in a disorganised community perpetuates teenage motherhood, creating a situation where the poor stays poor. Moreover, single parenthood becomes normative and acceptable and the only way to break this cycle is through education, as espoused by the above quote.

### Parental monitoring and support

Evidence shows that parental support and monitoring are protective factors that buffer young people against association with deviant peers as well as alcohol and substance misuse (Kandell, 1996). Parental support denotes parental behavioural conduct toward their children, which communicates to them that they are valued, and includes praising, nurturing, reassuring, and showing affection (Barnes et al, 2006). Parental monitoring is defined as parental behaviours towards their children that are geared towards regulating and controlling children's behaviour whilst enabling parents to be aware of their whereabouts, actions and whom they associate with (Barnes et al, 2006).

An increase in single-parent households within this community diminishes both informal and formal social controls at a community level (see Sampson & Groves, 1989). One participant alluded: *'I think that is where it comes in, where there is maybe a divorce or a problem in the house and it leads to a point where the parent don't care anymore ... and then discover the children is involved in that danger of that stuff [i.e. drugs]'*. (Interview 2)

Factors such as divorce and absent living fathers' further compound disengaged neglectful parenting. As postulated by Ward, Makusha and Bray (2015), teen fathers in this community, as in many other low-income South African contexts, face considerable barriers to regular involvement with their children, including inability to provide for their child due to financial constraints, social disapproval, and lack of family support for his relationship with the mother and his child (Ward et al, 2015). One participant in this study highlighted that teen fathers are sometimes excluded, and emphasised that grandmothers often take over parental responsibility from their teen daughters and exclude the father from the life of the child: *'When the grandmother takes over the responsibility from the kid mother, then the father of the child is absolved from responsibility... [They] don't worry about him, now he can go and do the same [to another female],... [and] most of [these] kids [they] come with disciplinary problems'*. (FGD 1). Teen fathers are thus absolved from the responsibility of parenting and fatherhood, which lead to negative outcomes for the child. Yet, numerous studies have highlighted the importance of father involvement in the lives of their children (Lazarus, Tonsing, Ratele & Van Niekerk, 2011; Morrell & Richter, 2005).

Single parents have many demands on their time, but don't have the option of sharing parental responsibilities, which makes it very challenging for them to provide children with the time and care that children in two-parent homes receive (see Bianchi, 2011). The erratic working hours of parents contributes to parents' lack of availability and time spent with their children (as discussed above): *'Many of them (i.e. parents) work shifts... especially on a Saturday and... Sunday'* (Interview 7). As reported by Barnes and Farrell (1992), this lack of parental support and monitoring is the reason why many children engage in several co-occurring deviant behaviour. One participant stated: *'They (i.e. the children) are deteriorating ... they walk around and display violent behaviour. When it comes to older children, [they are into] 'tik' (methamphetamine) and that kind of stuff, drugs that they use...'* (FGD 3). In a study conducted in Nashville, Knoxville, and Bloomington in the US, Beyers, Bates, Pettit and Dodge (2003) found that an



increased amount of unsupervised time spent in the community and lower positive parental engagement correlated with increased externalising behaviour.

### Formal and informal social networks

The prevalence and interdependence of both formal (e.g. organisational participation and infrastructure) and informal (e.g. friendship ties) social networks in a community may influence child outcomes through its influence on family processes (Kubrin & Wo, 2016; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2016).

Community organisations represent the structural manifestation of local community solidarity, which is directly linked to the degree of formal and informal social control within a community (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Knoester and Haynie (2005) postulate that the stresses and difficulties of single-parenthood can limit the time, money, and energy available to single parents to be able to participate in neighbourhood groups or organisations that offer formal social controls such as schools, early childhood development centres, churches, libraries, and recreation centres. One participant alluded to the lack of parental participation stating: *'I can't even hold a meeting, then they [i.e. the parents] tell me "teacher I work night shift"'* (Interview 7). These local organisations are therefore likely to be absent or weak in communities with higher numbers of single parents. One participant highlighted that even though such institutions *'contribute to the development of the community, the support for these institutions or groups [are] very little'* (FGD 3).

Participants in this study also emphasised that there is a lack of community infrastructure and amenities, as demonstrated in the following quote: *'there is no library here, so children get up to mischief'* (Interview 1). The lack of infrastructure thus diminishes opportunities for participation in local organisations by both parents as well as young children. Participants remarked that *'there are no recreational opportunities for children here'* (Interview 5) and *'we don't have extra-mural activities for the kids, that's why they just wander around, there's nothing to do'* (Interview 3). Another participant drew attention to the unsafety of some existing amenities such as the local park often used by children, stating that *'the park is inadequate for children to play in... because my child got terribly hurt twice at the park'* (Interview 5). One participant felt that the safety of children was a highly neglected area as *'absolutely nothing is done [about children's safety]'* (Interview 5). The same participant expressed her anxiety about the safety of her own child, indicating: *'My child is always in the house. I don't allow my child to go outside... I am very scared'* (Interview 5). Others highlighted the need for security structures such as a neighbourhood watch and police presence within the community – both factors that contribute to community social control: *'There is no neighbourhood watch that walk late at night. In the past there was, it was very safe and they used to walk in the neighbourhood. The police used to pick up individuals, but I don't see that anymore'* (Interview 4). Such weak links between community structures diminish the ability of a community to support and preserve its local interests, which as a result, are weak (Sampson & Groves, 1989). The lack of infrastructure, recreational opportunities and access to local organisations thus diminish community social support thereby affecting parenting practices, which inhibits children's socio-emotional development and well-being. Community social support have particularly been singled out as an important factor in helping and supporting parents to cope with the difficulties and demands of child rearing as it acts as a safety net against the negative effects of parental stress in controlling discipline and a possible reduction in reactive parenting (Fram, 2003).

According to systems theory, community-based social networks reflect the essential social organisation of human ecological communities (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Factors such as low socio-economic status, poverty and family structure affect social ties within a community, which are the foundation of community informal social control (Warner et al, 2003). The more social ties in a community or more adults in a community who are acquainted with each other, the greater their capacity for social control or ability to take charge of supervising each other's children. These social ties may act as a buffer preventing various negative child and youth outcomes (Carlson, n.d.; Sampson & Groves, 1989). Conversely, distrust and a lack of connectedness in a community can diminish a community's competency for social control.

Participants in this study acknowledged the lack of cohesion in their community as a whole. One participant emphasised that community members are disconnected from each other stating: *'The community is now so divided, because everyone is just doing his own thing'* (FGD 2). This disconnection was deemed to lead to a lack of social control: *'What I can tell you, my neighbours don't care about each other. You know, what if I saw one of your children doing something wrong and I am going to tell you*

*then you cross for me* (FGD2). Another participant stated: *'A lot of our younger generation are doing drugs, robberies, you know, sleeping out of their homes doing bad stuff'* (FGD 1). The lack of social ties between neighbours, which is indicative of a socially disorganized community, brings about an inadequate and poor system of social control, which have a negative bearing on parenting practices and child and youth outcomes. In essence, residents function as the "eyes and ears" of the community through their presence, informal nonofficial actions and surveillance, and helps parenting by, for example, admonishing misbehaving youth and informing parents of their children's misconduct (Kubrin & Wo, 2016). From a systemic perspective, the supervision of young people and control of delinquent behaviour in a community is not only dependent on a child's family, but on a complex network of friendship and relational connections that provide a form of collective family control or guardianship (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

Participants in this study further pointed out that the informal social control within their community is weakened by poverty-related dependency of some parents on drug dealers. This in turn inhibits their ability to exercise their communal responsibility to support positive community values and diminishes social ties among community members. The following quote elucidates this point. *'They won't stand together [because] women go to the drug dealers every day and ask for a loaf of bread's money and then the day that we as a community want to stand [together] then [they say] leave him (i.e. the drug lord). They don't fight for their children'*. (FGD 1)

Community members thus turn to drug lords for financial assistance in order to survive. As a result, collective values are eroded. In this regard, participants noted that *'disrespect is very high here'* (FGD 2); *'there is a great lack of communication between our people who live in this place'* (FGD 2) and this in turn erode the connectedness and cohesion within the community. Warner et al. (2003) postulate that values such as those espoused by community institutions like churches, schools and families are a central cultural aspect that social disorganisation theory takes into account. When community members are unable to live out common positive cultural values, it indicates that such values are not maintained through their visible presence in the community. Such a weak culture diminishes the social control power of the community (Warner, Leukefeld & Kraman, 2003). The following quote demonstrates this point: *The drug dealers... [and] shebeens... they break down the values and morals and, you know, what parents try to educate and teach their children, it is just reversed, you know, when children get involved in these kind of things'* (FGD 3). Participants thus attributed the weak collective values and diminished social control within the community to the disorganising influence of gangsters, poverty, drug lords and a lack of community connectedness, all of which hamper parents' ability to shield their children. These community structural conditions obstruct the realisation of conventional values advocated by community institutions, which reduces allegiance to them, and consequently lessens the prospect of informal control of behaviours that contravene those values (Warner et al, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

This article sought to explore factors that parents who live in a disadvantaged community believe have an impact on their daily parenting practices. Their descriptions revealed that disadvantaged communities face many challenges such as socio-economic deprivation, unemployment and poverty; community disorganisation such as violence, substance abuse, drug peddling; large numbers of single-parent families, often headed by mothers and teenagers; poor social support and community connectedness; as well as poor formal and informal social control. These factors are evident in many of South Africa's low and middle-income communities (see Mogotlane et al, 2010; Bailey et al, 2013; Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Understanding the importance of these factors in the context of their influence on parenting is critical for developing parenting interventions. This lack of resources, albeit social support structures, financial assistance, or community infrastructure, are considered as important contributors to parenting practices and child outcomes. Parenting by itself is no easy task and when compounded by multiple stressors, competing parental responsibilities and demands, and a lack of formal and informal support structures, it can result in reactive parenting responses and other negative parenting practices, which in turn can lead to resentment and anger on the part of children and result in negative behaviour.

Based on the aforementioned findings, the development of interventions that focus on parenting practices should be multi-level, multi-faceted, contextually relevant, and intentionally focus on developing proactive parenting practices.

Programmes should address various socio-demographic factors, as well as incorporate components of fatherhood and masculinity to address the lack of father involvement in parenting. Such interventions should also strengthen community connectedness in order to enhance formal and informal social control alongside providing parenting skills in order to promote positive parenting and therefore positive child and youth behavioural outcomes. Further research is necessary in order to understand how contextual factors intersect with parenting practices and in turn contributes to child and youth outcomes. Because this study was conducted in, only one community within the Western Cape and the results can therefore not be generalised to other communities.

#### **Endnote:**

1 While Apartheid categories are used here for research purposes, the use of these terms does not indicate endorsement of these classifications.

#### **Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank Dr Liezille Jacobs for planting the seed out of which this article developed.

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