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South Africa

Through the eyes of a child: Perceptions of family

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how South African children define family and how race, gender and family structure influence children's perception of family. In this study, 101 grade 8 learners' (13-15yrs) perceptions of family were measured. Perceptions were examined by using 16 vignettes describing different combinations of people (e.g. cohabiting couple with child, married couple without children). Some differences were found in relation to gender, race and participants' own family structure. Answers to an open-ended question suggested that the majority of male and female participants defined family in terms of love and affection, blood relationships and resident parents. There were no significant differences between male and female's perception of family. In general, children endorsed a variety of family types.

Keywords: race, gender, family structure, children's perceptions, family

Defining “the family”

The most popular definition of family is the traditional nuclear family which consists out of a mother, father and usually a child. Levin and Trost (1992) explain that there is no unity in our definition of family. Today, family takes on various forms such as a single mother with her child, adopted children, step-families, homosexual couples with children and extended families. Some may even say that close friends are family (Anyan & Pryor, 2002). Levin and Trost (1992) states that the essence of family varies from person to person, the context in which it is perceived and the timing.

In South Africa particularly, family structures have changed, leading to questions such as whom do we consider as family? Levin and Trost (1992) explains that it is easy to describe people who live in your household but when participants are asked who do they consider as family, questions arise such as can they include extended family, pets, close friends etc. This makes it difficult to omit or include certain individuals.

Studies on children’s perceptions have expanded over a time period of 70 years. Pryor and Rigg (2007) states that nuclear families have evolved into a wide range of realistic descriptions of what family is, as a result of the diversity of the child’s own family structure.

Children’s perceptions of family

In the past, research focussed on parents’ perceptions of family. However, in recent decades perceptions of children’s intellectual ability have changed. Before, children’s views were not taken into consideration because they do not have the cognitive ability describe their feelings and to make mature decisions (Morrow, 1998).

As a result, children’s perceptions of family have become a focus area for many researchers (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Anyan and Pryor (2002) suggests that the importance of children’s perceptions of family is that not all children live in traditional nuclear families. Children are exposed to different family structures such as single parent families, extended families, same sex parents etc. that influences children’s perception of how they understand family, how these factors (own family structure) influences their perception of family.

Two independent studies have investigated how culture and family structure influences children's perceptions of family. Both conducted their study on children's perceptions of family among European New Zealanders, Asian, New Zealand Maori and Pacific nation students (Rigg & Pryor, 2007; Anyan & Pryor, 2002). Both identified that affective factors such as love, care and respect are important components when endorsing family. When describing family structure, cohabiting couples with children were more likely to be endorsed as family than married couples without children. The overall findings suggest that children are more likely to endorse a family setting when there is child involved, regardless whether a couple are married or cohabiting.

The study conducted by Zabriskie and McCormick (2003) about the importance of family leisure time provides evidence that love and affection are not only important when young children explain family perceptions but that older children also consider love and affection as important entities when describing family.

The most important criteria that children use to define family are affective factors, co-residence (people who live in the same house) and biological factors. In a study by Newman, Roberts and Syre (1993), they investigated how school children all the way to university students perceived family. The results were that 60% of the sample described family in terms of love and affection (affective factors) while 38% described it as those in the same household, 29% defined it in terms of family roles and 24% saw family in terms of biological factors.

Our perceptions are moulded by our environment, culture and religion and our views differ from person to person. Rigg and Pryor (2007) reported that a child's personal experience of family structure forms the basis of his or her perceptions. Family structure is not the only factor that influences our perceptions; our culture, gender, socio-economic status and political pasts mould us and our perceptions of who we are and how we perceive life. From a young age traditional values, beliefs and norms are bestowed on children. Thus building up the child's knowledge about his culture and what is perceived as the norm for the specific culture (Wright, 1998) Therefore parents are an important influence in developing how a child understands and perceives family (Louw, Van Ede and Louw, 1998).

Anyan and Pryor (2002) found that Maori, European and Pacific participants made no distinction between the traditional nuclear family and cohabiting couples compared to Asian children who were more likely to endorse a particular scenario as a family if the parents were married. Anyan and Pryor suggest that culture and tradition plays an important role in Asian culture. Family is perceived of great importance and separation between spouses is rare.

In relation to the child's own family structure in the study mentioned above, the findings suggest that children from step-families were more likely to endorse same sex parents and single parent families endorse family members without love as family (Anyan & Pryor, 2002).

Day and Remigy (1999) selected 120 children from age 5, 8 and 11 from Mexico and France. Piagetian type clinical interviews were used to examine the children. Children in both cultures endorsed marriage as an important factor when describing family. Mexican children were less likely to describe a close friend as family in comparison to 50% of French children who described it as family. The researcher's concluded that children's perceptions of family are influenced by social and cultural factors as well as their cognitive development.

According to Piaget's theory children older than 5 years have the cognitive ability to make rational decisions and the ability to distinguish between what is right and wrong according to the specific culture (Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998). At the age of 5 and 7 years, children also have the intellectual ability to describe families in terms of residency (people living in the same household) and biological relatedness. Day and Remigy (1998) explained that 5 year olds described family in terms of spatial proximity and children 8-11 conceived of family in terms of blood relationships.

Little research has been done on gender and how it influences children's perceptions of family. Alma Gottlieb (2002), states in her anthropological work that gender is not a fixed and predictable entity it is always changing and adapting to new situations. She also states that gender is shaped by our culture and the environment we are exposed to. It is shaped by everyone and everything around us. In turn how people perceive gender and whatever expectations they have will influence their understanding of gender.

There are still so much we do not know about children's perceptions of family. Firstly, the majority of the work done in this area is based on children 5-12 and 16-21years. Little research on gender differences have been done in regard to children's perceptions of family. Another gap in our knowledge is that much of the research conducted on children's perceptions of family has been conducted in developed countries such as New Zealand, France, Sweden and the UK.

The present investigation was designed to study children's perceptions of family, in relation to gender, race and family structure. The study aims to add to our current knowledge of how children age 13- 15 years perceive family, how gender differences influences children's perceptions, whether there are any cultural differences in South Africa compared to the results found in developed countries



METHOD

Participants

The study was designed to explore cultural, family structure and racial differences among young adolescent's perception of family. Similar studies have been conducted in developed countries but not in South Africa and most of the studies neglected to include differences that may occur in gender types. We are specifically interested in i) whether there are differences of family perceptions in racial groups, ii) whether there are differences among gender and iii) whether family structure play an important role in defining family.

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Participants were given to 110 participants from whom 101 were available for analysis. The participants were high school children between the ages of 13-15 years (mean age=13.9 years) Questionnaires were completed in classroom situations. Girls made up 66% of the sample and males 35%.

The ethnic composition of the sample was mainly white (72%) of the sample and coloured (26%). In regard to family structure 12% of the children came from divorced families, 15% from single parent households and the remaining 73% from traditional nuclear families.

Measures

The first part of the questionnaire consisted out of demographic information where the participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, ethnicity and religion. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions about the participant's socio-economic background, which were followed by vignettes.

The vignettes consisted out of 16 scenarios that described different groupings of family settings. The vignettes were similar to those used by Levin and Trost (1992); the names of the people in the vignettes were adapted to a South African context so that the participants can associate them with their particular cultural group.

The last section of the questionnaire contained an open ended question, where the participants were asked to explain what family means to them.

Procedure

We first asked the principals from the various schools permission to conduct our study at the particular schools. Afterwards the children were given a letter containing information for parents or guardians about the study and parents or guardians were asked for their children to partake in the study. The students were also asked to complete assent forms informing that they are voluntarily participating in the study.

After carefully explaining the study and what was expected of them, time was allowed to ask questions about anything that was unclear concerning the questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed in classroom situations and took about 10 minutes to complete.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 shows the percentage of the total sample endorsing each group of people as family. The majority of the participants endorsed scenarios where blood relationships and co-residence were apparent. In question 13 it seems that cohabiting couples without children are endorsed as the lowest family setting, in question 9 however, the majority of the sample endorsed this cohabiting couple without children as family. Therefore, the least likely scenario's to be endorsed were cohabiting homosexual couple with children and a trusting friend. The traditional "nuclear" family was most likely to be endorsed as family.

Table 1: Percentage of total sample endorsing each group as a family

GROUPING	%
1. Married couple without child	70.30
2. Married couple with child	96.04
3. Divorced mother with child	86.14
4. Divorced father (child in another city)	88.00
5. Divorced parents	56.44
6. Grandparents	90.10
7. Married couple (son in another city)	90.10
8. Couple with son and friend	73.27
9. Cohabiting without children	70.30
10. Cohabiting with a child	78.22
11. Cohabiting with child, separated	60.40
12. Mother not living with child	55.45
13. Siblings living together	90.10
14. Cohabiting without children	21.78
15. Homosexuals cohabiting with child	35.64
16. Trusting friend	29.70

Chi-square analysis were performed to examine differences in the proportions of males and females scenarios as family. Table 2 shows the results of these analysis. The only significant differences were found for questions 2, 7, 9, and 14; as can be seen in table 1. Males were more likely tan females to endorse a married couple with a child and a cohabiting couple without children as family. Females were more likely to endorse the scenario of a married couple with their son living in another city as family. Question 3 has a borderline significance ($p < 0.10$), in which females were more likely to endorse a divorced mother with a child as family.

Table 2: Percentage of total gender sample endorsing each grouping as a family

GROUPING	MALE	FEMALE	χ^2	P
1. Married couple without child	74.29	66.18	0.41	0.52
2. Married couple with child	88.57	68.00	7.85	0.01
3. Divorced mother with child	77.14	90.90	5.18	0.07
4. Divorced father (child in another city)	82.86	90.90	1.42	0.23
5. Divorced parents	57.14	56.06	1.71	0.92
6. Grandparents	82.86	93.93	3.93	0.14
7. Married couple (son in another city)	77.14	96.97	10.27	0.01
8. Couple with son and friend	37.14	21.21	2.96	0.09
9. Cohabiting without children	40.00	24.24	2.72	0.10
10. Cohabiting with a child	77.14	78.79	0.04	0.85
11. Cohabiting with child, separated	54.28	65.15	1.80	0.18
12. Mother not living with child	65.71	50.00	2.35	0.31
13. Siblings living together	85.71	92.42	1.15	0.28
14. Cohabiting without children	37.14	13.64	9.75	0.01
15. Homosexuals cohabiting with child	45.71	30.30	2.37	0.12
16. Trusting friend	37.14	25.76	1.41	0.23

In table 3, chi-square analysis were performed to examine the racial differences in children's perceptions of family. There were significant differences occurred in questions 1 and 6. White children were more likely to endorse a married couple without a child as family than coloured children. In addition, more white participants than coloured participants included grandparents in their perception of family.

Borderline significant results were found for questions 3 and 4, which are concerned with whether parents who are divorced and have a child together are considered as family. More than 90% of white children than coloured children considered them to be a family. However, the majority of both groups perceived these two scenarios as family.

Table 3: Percentage of total race group endorsing each grouping as a family

GROUPING	WHITE	COLOURED	χ^2	P
1. Married couple without child	79.45	50.00	8.20	0.00
2. Married couple with child	97.26	92.31	1.21	0.27
3. Divorced mother with child	90.41	73.08	6.13	0.05
4. Divorced father (child in another city)	93.15	80.77	3.24	0.07
5. Divorced parents	54.79	65.38	0.91	0.63
6. Grandparents	94.52	76.92	8.60	0.01
7. Married couple (son in another city)	89.04	92.31	0.45	0.79
8. Couple with son and friend	21.92	34.62	1.64	0.20
9. Cohabiting without children	26.03	42.31	2.41	0.12
10. Cohabiting with a child	76.71	88.46	1.64	0.20
11. Cohabiting with child, separated	63.01	53.85	0.67	0.41
12. Mother not living with child	57.53	53.85	0.16	0.93
13. Siblings living together	94.52	84.62	2.53	0.11
14. Cohabiting without children	21.92	23.08	0.37	0.83
15. Homosexuals cohabiting with child	31.51	42.31	0.99	0.32
16. Trusting friend	26.03	34.62	0.70	0.40

In table 4 where we investigated whether the participant's family structure influences children's perceptions of family. The only significant results was for question 3, whether a divorced mother with a child constituted a family. Although the majority of children from all family structures agreed that this constitute a family, children from single-parent families were least likely to see this scenario as family.

Table 4: Percentage of total family structure sample endorsing each grouping as a family

GROUPING	MARRIED	DIVORCED	χ^2	P
1. Married couple without child	72.97	66.67	1.09	0.58
2. Married couple with child	97.30	100.00	4.27	0.12
3. Divorced mother with child	90.54	83.33	9.59	0.05
4. Divorced father (child in another city)	90.54	83.33	1.62	0.44
5. Divorced parents	51.35	75.00	3.85	0.43
6. Grandparents	91.89	91.67	3.02	0.55
7. Married couple (son in another city)	89.19	83.33	2.77	0.60
8. Couple with son and friend	24.32	33.33	0.82	0.66
9. Cohabiting without children	27.03	25.00	2.45	0.30
10. Cohabiting with a child	77.03	75.00	0.76	0.68
11. Cohabiting with child, separated	60.27	66.67	0.18	0.91
12. Mother not living with child	57.53	41.67	2.66	0.62
13. Siblings living together	91.89	91.67	2.02	0.37
14. Cohabiting without children	21.62	16.67	0.76	0.94
15. Homosexuals cohabiting with child	32.43	33.33	2.40	0.30
16. Trusted friend	28.38	25.00	0.95	0.62

In the open-ended question, children were asked to explain what family meant to them. The responses were as follow: the majority of male's and female's participants endorsed family in terms of blood relation (brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts etc.) resident parents (people who live in the same house) and affective factors such as care, love, happiness, respect and trust.

Other criteria participants used to describe family were that parents should not fight, without their family they cannot survive, people who are closest to you, people joined in marriage, only those who are in a relationship and a couple who are linked by children and good communication constitute a good family.

DISCUSSION

From the results we can see that South African children are accepting of different family structures. The majority of the participants endorsed a scenario when a child was present, whether the couple were cohabiting or married. To the majority of the sample, the presence of children is more important than legal ties such as marriage in defining a family. In Rigg and Pryor's (2007) study, only 1% of their participants viewed family in terms of legal ties and the majority of the participants also implement that a child constitutes a family.

50% of children endorsed cohabiting couples as family. In comparison to married couples without children and cohabiting who have children; cohabiting couples were more likely to be endorsed as family.

Children's open-ended explanations of what family means correspond with previous research such as work done by Pryor and Rodgers (2001); Day and Remigy (1999); Bridges, Bridges, Dunn and O'Connor (2006); Zabriskie and McCormick (2003); Newman, Roberts and Syre (1993). The majority of the participants explained family in terms of love, trust, support, biological factors and residential factors (living in the same house). There were little differences between how males and females defined family.

Anyan and Pryor (2002) found that more than 80% of their sample endorsed different family structures from which they concluded that legal status (marriage) and both parent households are not important criteria for endorsing family. In our analysis, we found that the results in South African children also concluded that marriage and both parent households are not important when endorsing family. Our findings showed that when children were included in a particular scenario, legal status was not an important factor.

Rigg and Pryor (2007) found that in regard to family structure more children endorsed cohabiting couples as family when there is a child involved, oppose to someone who is married and have no children. The majority of the findings in this study agree with these results, even though the majority of the participants endorsed both settings as family.

Gender

Few differences were found between male's and female's perceptions of family. However, males more likely to endorse a married couple with a child and cohabiting couples without children as family. Females were more likely to endorse a divorced mother and child; and a married couple with a son in another city as family. With regard to different perceptions between male and female there are no clear cut patterns that in to how they define family. However, males were more likely to endorse cohabiting couples without children as families.

In comparison to Ford's study in 1994, 9 of the 16 vignettes results were statistically significant. In these 9 scenarios, females were more accepting in endorsing different family settings as males. In the present study males and females alike endorse different types of family settings. Statistical significant results between males and females were found in regard to cohabiting without children, marriage without children and divorced. The majority of the children did not endorse cohabiting without children, same sex parents and a trusting friend as family.

Compared to Ford's (1994) work, the majority of the results found in the present study supported his findings. However, females were less likely than males to endorse these family settings.

Race

Significant racial differences were found for the following scenarios: Married couple without children and whether grandparents are endorsed as family. In both instances, white children were more likely to endorse these scenarios as family. Only 50% of the coloured participants endorsed a married couple without a child as family compared to the 80% of white participants. Even though the majority of coloured children endorsed grandparents as part of a family, the results from white participants were 17.6% higher. These findings are surprising given that the majority of white children live in nuclear families whereas the majority of coloured children live with their extended family. We would assume that coloured participants would be more likely to include their grandparents as family members.

White participants were more likely than coloured participants to endorse divorced parents who have children together. White participants appeared to have a slightly flexible conception of family than coloured participants.

The results indicate that there were little significant differences between coloured and white participants. The results for the remainder of the vignettes, suggests that both coloured and white participants are prone to endorse different family settings. Ford (1994) suggests that many researchers are determined to find out whether cross-cultural factors such as demographic characteristics, socialization and values between different cultural or racial groups are the result for broader definitions of family.

Amato (2005) suggests that among African-Americans and white children, African-American children adjust better to life in single parent households, but reasons for this is still unclear. Perhaps the reason for this is that African-American children are more exposed to single parenting and divorce whereas the white children are more exposed to nuclear family settings.

The present study contradicts the work done by Amato (2005). The data represented that both racial groups endorse different family settings more or less the same. In the statistical significant examples in table 3, more than 50% of both racial groups endorsing these family settings, only white participant's respondents were higher than those of the coloured participants. The differences found could have been influenced by an uneven distribution of racial groups (more white participants than coloured participants).

Family structure

There was only one significant difference in table 4 concerning children's perceptions of family in regard to family structure. Children from single parent households were less likely to endorse a divorced mother with a child as family. Children whose parents are still married (nuclear family) had the highest prevalence in endorsing this scenario as family. Children of divorced parents' endorsement of this family setting were a little lower than that of children from nuclear families.

Hare-Mustin (1998) that in traditional societies family structures have been male-oriented in nuclear (mother, father & child) families. He explains that a nuclear family represents a strong bond between the spouses and it has a child-centred focus. His theory supports our findings of how children perceive family and why the majority of participants endorse different family settings when there is a child involved.

The sample only included white and coloured learners, and is therefore not representative of the South African population as a whole. Also, the effects of different religions could not be examined (as almost all of the participants described themselves as Christians). Furthermore, there was a strong association between race and socio-economic status, which made it impossible to differentiate the effects of these two variables. Some participants have misinterpreted the open-ended question and gave abstract answers.

Future research should be directed at how socio-economic status and religion influences children's perception of family. How violence and child abuse can be included to acquire knowledge as to how it influences children's perceptions of family.

The research concluded that there are differences in race, gender and family structure. In South Africa participants described family in terms of affective factors, biological factors and resident factors as in developed countries. Overall, the majority of participants endorsed a variety of family settings.

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QUESTIONNAIRE

Section 1

Please fill in the following and where necessary tick (✓) the appropriate box.

Age:

Gender:

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are your parents...?

Married	<input type="checkbox"/>
Divorced	<input type="checkbox"/>
Single parents	<input type="checkbox"/>

Race:

Black	<input type="checkbox"/>
White	<input type="checkbox"/>
Coloured	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: Please specify. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>

Religion:

Christian	<input type="checkbox"/>
Muslim	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jewish	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: Please specify _____	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 2

1. Please answer the following questions by ticking (✓) the appropriate box.

1.1 Do you own or have access to following items?

Clean running water	Yes	No
Electricity	Yes	No
Car	Yes	No
Computer	Yes	No
Cellular phone	Yes	No

1.2 In which of the following do you live?

House	Yes	No
Flat	Yes	No
Informal housing (Shack)	Yes	No
Wendy house	Yes	No

2. Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible.

1.1 How many people live in your house?	
1.2 How many rooms does your house have?	
1.3 How many people share a room?	

Section 3

Please read the questions carefully and tick (✓) the appropriate box.

1. Anna and Frank are a middle-aged married couple without children. Are they Family?	Yes	No
2. Nandipha and Sipho are a married couple in their 30's; they have a six-year old Son. Are they family?	Yes	No
3. Carol is divorced and has a 10-year old daughter named Carry, and she lives with Carry. Are these two family?	Yes	No
4. Carry's father, David lives in the other end of the city. Are Carry and David family	Yes	No
5. Are Carol and David family?	Yes	No
6. Nazim and Sehaam are Fahim's grandparents. They do not live with Fahim. Are these three family?	Yes	No
7. Michelle and Mark are married and have a daughter named Nadine. Michelle and Mark have a son, Craig, who lives in another city. Are these four family?	Yes	No
8. Karla and Adriaan are married and have a son in his teens. Francois, who has a pal, Marko. All these four live together. Are these four a family?	Yes	No
9. Gregg and Debbie are in their 30's and have cohabited (living together) for 3 years. They have no children. Are they family?	Yes	No
10. Aphiwe and Precious are in their 30's and cohabit. They have a 6-year old daughter, Puliswe. Are these three family?	Yes	No
11. Matthew and Erica have cohabited. They are now separated. They have a 10-year old son, Ben, who lives with Erica. Are these three family?	Yes	No
12. Ben's mother, Erica, lives in the other end of the city. Are Erica and Matthew a family?	Yes	No
13. Jan, Johanna and Petrus are siblings, and they are all around 30-years old. The three of them live together. Are they family?	Yes	No

14. Carl and Christen are in their 30's and cohabit. Neither of them has a child. Are these two a family?	Yes	No
15. Lena and Lisa are both in their 30's and cohabit. Lisa has a 6-year old daughter, Lotta. These three live together. Are they a family?	Yes	No
16. Magda and Mike are married and have a daughter, about ten years old. Magda has a very good friend with whom she can speak about everything. Are these four family?	Yes	No

Section 4

Please answer the following question in your own words.

1. What is your understanding of family?



Thank you for taking the time to partake in this study. Your participation is greatly appreciated.