HETEROSEXUAL MEN AND PARENTHOOD DECISION-MAKING IN SOUTH AFRICA: ATTENDING TO THE INVISIBLE NORM

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A heteronormative blind-spot

- the invisible norm = fertile, white heterosexual men
- normalcy & naturalness of childbearing in the heterosexual life course
- Research concentrates on those who do not fit into the normative category of married heterosexuality
- We do not know about
  - the decision-making processes of heterosexuals
  - what role each partner plays in this process
  - the part played by fertile, heterosexual men.
A myopic focus on problem men

- men considered of necessity, because of negative effects on women’s sexual & reproductive choices

- narrow view persists, despite attempts to recognise men’s constructive engagement

- research concentrates on (so-called) risky, problematic or disadvantaged, ‘Black’ men

- ‘White’ economically-advantaged men = invisible norm

- inadvertently reiterates Whiteness as invisible norm
A narrative-discursive analysis of male involvement in parenthood decision-making among ‘white’ heterosexuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Reproductive status</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ave age (years)</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. &gt; 40 yrs. ‘past childbearing’</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 21 – 30 yrs.</td>
<td>Childfree</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n =)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
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</tbody>
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Data analysis: The Narrative-discursive method

• synthesis of discourse analysis + narrative theory, influenced by discursive psychology

• How speakers:
  • draw on discourses/discursive resources & the positioning within these
  • mobilise discursive resources

• Positioning analysis ➔ Interactive negotiation of meaning & power

• Rhetorical work:
  • discursive tactics ➔ “interactive moves” to deal with interactive ‘trouble’
  • rhetorical or positioning strategies

• ‘Trouble’ ➔ Negative/undesirable positions
Findings: a troublesome topic

• 3 main sources of trouble:

(1) ‘An unusual conversational move’

(2) Changing gender norms – The ‘new’ father

(3) Parenthood = choice vs. chance
Findings: repairing trouble by *veiling silences*

- avoidance, denial, deflection, **reframing**, and intellectualizing
- veiled silences → do not know how else to respond
- “results in a deflection that, although often not intentional, is purposeful nonetheless” (Mazzei, 2004: 30)
reframing

• ‘automatic childbearing’
  • having children happens spontaneously after marriage
  • No/very little conscious deliberation/overt discussion

• two central & inter-connected discursive resources
  1. romance/love script
  2. canonical couple narrative

• socio-cultural norms (about passion, romantic love, gender, and ‘normal’ heterosexual adult development) make it possible for participants to
  • negotiate alternative positive positions
  • Reframe passive/non-planning positively & “save face”

• Spontaneous, romantic, ‘natural’ scenario vs. calculated, cold, scientific scenario → reinforce automatic childbearing

• male involvement discursively shifted to the background
Meaning and implications of veiled silences

• suggest no specific role for men

• automatic childbearing key discursive resource for veiling silences and obscuring gender roles

• Family planning and reproduction as a female issue & responsibility

• Limitation of women’s autonomy
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