Character Traits Perceived as Ideal for Children by Ndau Mothers in Rusitu Valley, Chimanimani

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Abstract

This qualitative case inquiry investigated character traits (tsika) perceived by Ndau mothers as ideal for their children in Rusitu Valley, Chimanimani. Social Constructionism and Selman's Social Cognition theories formed the theoretical framework. The study used a qualitative phenomenological case design. Twenty-two (22) participants were purposefully selected. To collect data, four (4) focus group discussions with eighteen (18) mothers and four (4) individual interviews with four (4) grandmothers were undertaken. The grandmothers were involved in the study because of their wide experience in childcare. To make the meaning of the collected data, the researcher applied the grounded theory of data analysis. This study established that among others, Ndau mothers perceive six-character traits: responsibility, altruism, confidence, assertiveness, confidence, and resourcefulness as ideal for their children's holistic development. The study found that the mothers and grandmothers assumed a mentorship role to socialise their children in developing the requisite traits for the sustainability of the Ndau culture and success of their children in life. It was also established that, if children attain the traits, it enhances holistic development, creativity, problem-solving skills, success in life and social cohesion. This study recommends that parents should continue to instil humility in their children by teaching them the essential character traits within their cultural perspective.

Key Words: Character traits, Ndau, cultural identity, values, development, responsibility

Background of the Study

People live in diverse cultural and ecological settings which influence their knowledge systems including child care, social and cultural practices. Character trait (t*sika)* is enshrined in people's beliefs and values. People beliefs and values can be understood as part of their culture. This study examines character traits, *tsika* perceived as ideal for children by Ndau mothers of Rusitu Valley in Chimanimani. The Ndau community are found in the South-Eastern zone of Zimbabwe. In their community, it is mandatory for Ndau women to conceptualise the cultural identity of growing children and socialise their children to understand what it means to be a Ndau, in the context of a multicultural society. Multiculturalism as a global phenomenon places a new perspective that requires the Ndau to practice preservation of their beliefs and values (Mungwini, 2008; Hatshwayo, 2017). Hence, the phenomenon also requires the Ndau people of Rusitu valley, in Chimanimani, to question the validity of the traditionally acclaimed character traits perceived as ideal for their children.

It is true that child grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people Idang (2015). The child observes, imbibes and imitates the action of his elders and siblings (Antia, 2005). He or she observes religious services and marriage rituals taking place. The child experiences festivals, dances and traditional happenings involving peers and his relatives Idang (2015). Such a child, in the community, is imbedded in his cultural and physical environments. The observation shows that every child who grows up in society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society, whether knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction (Antia, 2005; Idang, 2015). The issue is how a sense of *Ndauness* (Sithole, 2018) develop among the growing children as perceived by their mothers and the character traits they exhibit. To understand the issue of character traits, the concept *tsika* need to discourse briefly.

Tsika in the context of Ndau mothers is humility, *unhu.* It refers to morality and conceptually tied to social beliefs and practices (Pearce, 1990; Perman, 2011). In the Ndau culture character traits are related to morality; it is conceptually tied to social beliefs and cultural practices. Experience shows that Ndau parents place importance to the teaching of prosocial behaviour through accepted character traits. As children become their own persons, their upbringing can be a complex challenge. Parents especially mothers must

deal with children who have wills and minds of their own. The parents in families have what they view as ideal character traits. The family is important as a model and a source of explicit standards of behaviour (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2004:283). Parents of prosocial children typically are prosocial themselves. Such parents point out character traits and models of prosocial behaviour, directing their children towards stories, play, games and television programmes that depict positive character traits (Perman, 2011). Character traits such as cooperation, empathy, generosity, and helpfulness are encouraged (Papalia, Olds and Feldman 2004:283).

Amos (2013) avers that in the African culture parenting is perceived to take the form which induct a child to be a responsible person. There are ways, including mother's care, attention and love the parents bring up for the child to imbibe cultural values needed to become a responsible adult.

A study on parenting carried by Barends (2002) at Pennsylvania State University in the USA found that child outcome is shaped by the parent's behaviour. Characteristics such as temperament also shape the child. Berends' study also found that parental characteristics such as higher self-esteem and internal locus of control have been found to influence behaviour in both African-American and Caucasian-American families with growing children. It was further revealed that parents' abilities to regulate their own' personality functioning, is linked to their ability to help their children regulate their personality.

The purpose of this study
A limited number of studies have focused on the socio-cultural context of parenting and personality development among the Ndau in Zimbabwe. The purpose of this study was to explore and identify character traits (tsika) perceived by Ndau mothers in Rusitu Valley Chimanimani, as ideal for their children. The study was guided by the following research question:
 What are the character traits perceived by Ndau mothers as ideal and their impact on the children's personality development?

Theoretical Framework
This study was informed by the Social Constructionism (Teilor, 2017), and Selman's Social Cognition Theory (Muuss, 1882; Selman, 2003). Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that examines the development of jointly constructed understandings of the world. It forms the basis for shared assumptions about reality (Amineh and Asl, 2015). The theory centers on the notions that human beings rationalize their experience by creating models of the social world. The models are then shared through language (Teilor, 2017). Social constructionism as a theory emphasizes that people take a critical stance towards their taken for granted ways of understanding the world view, culture, including our personality. Social constructionism is about the social construction of reality by people. The theory of social constructionism is premised on another key assumption that all ways of understanding the world and ourselves, the categories and concepts we use, bear historical and cultural sartorial (Teilor, 2017). Therefore, nothing is predetermined or absolute. Since the social world is the product of social processes. As a theory, social constructionism gives credence to human agency. This is the view that human beings can change themselves and the world they live in through the force of their apparently independently developed and freely chosen beliefs and actions. In the context of this study, Social Constructionism as a philosophy informs Ndau mothers in reconstructing ideal character traits perceived ideal for their children as the essence, in progressive sustanance of cultural values, in the face of multiculturalism.

Secondly, Selman's Social Cognition (SC) theory complemented social constructionism in this study. SC theory involves role-taking, perspective-taking, empathy, moral reasoning, interpersonal problem-solving, and self-knowledge (Muus, 1982; Selman, 2003). Selman further contends that to make moral decisions and behave in morally appropriate ways a child must be able to look at a situation from someone's perspective, that is to imagine what someone else may be thinking or feeling (Ormrod, 2000:104). In most cultures, one intended outcome of children's socialisation is the development of such prosocial behaviours and character traits such as cooperation, empathy and focus on the wellbeing of other individuals. People become socially acceptable and more productive citizens if as children they learn the advantages of portraying prosocial behaviour consistent with positive character traits. The home and school contexts, because they are the most

social environments in young children's lives, provide a perfect medium for good character building and development of prosocial behaviour.

Research Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological case study design was used in the study. In the approach participants are perceived as the custodian of information regarding the phenomenon under inquiry – Ndau mothers' perceived ideal character traits for their children. Character traits, tsika expected and exhibited by the Ndau children as expected by their mothers. The researcher was therefore interested with the lived experiences of Ndau mothers as they perceive their children' ideal character traits. Phenomenology requires that information should be obtained from people with lived experiences of the issue under investigation (De Vos et at, 2011; Davidsen, 2017; Mugweni, 2017). Qualitative phenomenological research is holistic, in the sense that it attempts to provide a contextual understanding of the complex interrelationships of causes and consequences of some cultural perceptions of Ndau mothers as they socialise their children into the 'true' Ndau culture regarding expected character traits (Manen, 2017; Nieuwenhuis, 2016).).

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (De Vos et all, 11) was employed to the handling of data, to investigate what character traits the mothers perceive as ideal for their children and make meaning of their life experiences in raising their children. The study was carried out in Rusitu Valley, Chimanimani district of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. The research targeted mothers with children aged one to sixteen years. The task was to construct an understanding of how issues of ethnicity and/ or identity consciousness influence people's perception of their children; *unhu* within a global, multicultural context of child development.

Instrumentation and Sampling

Data were collected through four Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) held with a total of eighteen (18) conveniently selected mothers aged between twenty to forty years in Rusitu Valley, Chimanimani district in Manicaland, Zimbabwe (Creswell, 2014). FGD was found to be a quick and convenient way to collect data from the mothers (Nyumba et al., 2018). To augment data from the mothers, data triangulation was engaged where four (4) grandmothers were individually interviewed. Grandmothers were included in the sample due to their wide experience of cultural issues and child care in the community. The phenomenological focus group discussions and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews were used as a way of getting data from people by asking and discoursing with them (Bryman, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

The participants gave their consent to be involved in the study. They completed consent forms to show their willingness to participate in the research. The purpose of the study was explained to the participant, and they were assured of absence from harm. They were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the research if they were not comfortable. Participants were also assured of anonymity in the research report. Hence their responses were coded.

Data Collection Procedures

To allow for the collection of as much relevant information as possible, the focus group and individual interviews were not tightly structured. Therefore, relevant issues which were not included in the interview guide but arose during the process of conducting the interviews were explored and noted in impromptu supplementary questions. This was in line with the flexible nature of qualitative research (Yin, 2014).

Trustworthiness

The research instruments were validated by research experts and a pilot study was conducted. Hence, the trustworthiness of data was ascertained.

Data Analysis

The main method that was used to analyse data from interviews was thematic content analysis using grounded theory. The process involved identifying, coding and categorising patterns in data (Creswell, 2014). The grounded theory is a systemic process of examining, selecting, categorising, comparing,

synthesising and interpreting data to establish findings of the main research question of the study (Yin, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

The data collected through focus group discussions and individual interviews yielded the following findings of the study represented diagrammatically in Figure 1.1 below.

Figure 1: Research Findings

As indicated in figure 1 above, the main character traits identified by Ndau mothers as ideal were: responsibility, altruism, humility, confidence, resilience, and resourcefulness. A discussion of results as found during interviews is explored below.

1. Responsibility

Most of the mother participants – eighteen out of twenty, interviewed reported responsibility as an important trait to be taught to a child. The mothers were of the view that they teach their children to be responsible so that they will stand up and be counted in their life. Others espoused that responsible people are always trusted and can easily be leaders in their community and elsewhere. To add their voices, the following is what some of the participants said:

I expect my child to be responsible. He should take ownership of his actions. If he is a responsible person, he will look after his young brothers and sisters later in life. He can also do what he is expected in life even when he becomes a grown man((M15).

I need my child to be responsible. I teach him to be like that. She will be able to look after her husband and children. She will obey the rules and laws of our community, treat other people with respect. My responsible child grows to be self-reliant, hardworking and develop positive aspects in her life (M10).

A child should be responsible. I give a child character education through storytelling and little reprimands for the child to develop responsibility so that he or she will honor up in life. I expect a

true Ndau child to treat others fairly and make correct decisions like a real man (dhodha chiro) in life (GM2).

Sentiments expressed by the mothers are consistent with findings emerging from literature. Amos (2013) and Street (2015), earlier found that teaching a child to be responsible helps him or her to take care of oneself, excels in school, and when grown up work diligently at a job and in like. Generally, responsible people are found to be responsible citizens who treat others fairly, are trustworthy, honour their commitments, and are environmentally aware. (Character Education, 2011). Consistently, Street (2015) found that responsibility infuses itself into all aspects of their lives, giving them opportunities to shine, and making the right decisions. Such people obey rules, laws, and show prosocial behaviour (Selman, 2003; Cherry, 2018).

2. Altruism

Results show that altruism was another character trait that most of the mother and grandmother participants collectively highlighted as important for children to possess. The participants gave responses such as putting the needs of others first and being morally upright. In the participants' view altruism would enhance unity among the families and the community. During focus group discussions mothers highlighted that:

A child should grow to connect with other people sharing happiness and sorrows. He needs to know how to take other's burdens, for example taking care of widows and orphans (M13).

Feeling for others is a character trait a child should have. He should feel for others in every respect. He should not be selfish; he should be a Christian to touch others (M17).

Results shown by the study are consistent with what was highlighted by Bronwell (2011), that
altruism is a selfless concern for the welfare of others. It is also highlighted that giving to others gets a person outside of oneself and stand in for others (Salmansohn, 2019). Generally, the literature shows that altruism raises a person's mood and self-esteem; in turn, it increases one's happiness in life (Salmansohn, 2019).

3. Humility

All participants in the study highlighted that humility is an important trait for children to develop. They proposed that humility- *unhu* is what they needed to teach their children so that they grow up to be humble people, who are not proud in life, respecting elders and their culture.
During interviews, mothers and grandmothers highlighted that:

All our children need to learn to be humble; A Ndau child should not be proud and arrogant. Due to modernisation- chimanjemanje, mothers should ensure that they still learn humility and respect (GM4).

It is good for our children to have positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, but for a child to have humility is important. As mothers, we need to show our children humility by modelling it. Us adults we should learn to swallow our pride, accept our mistakes and praise those whom wold have done well. This will show our children humility; they grow up experiencing and learning to be humble and respecting our elders and our chiefs (M11).

I say humility is what a chid should have. When our child shows he or she is humble, let us praise the child so that they continue to learn the good behaviour (M9).

In line with the above, recently released research by Street (2015) has shown that there is an important balance between having positive self-esteem and remaining humble that all children and adults need to learn. Due to modern parenting culture, parents have to make sure that children still have humility. Consistent with the results Street (2015) and Bronwell (2011) observed that children who lack humility might grow up to be arrogant adults, no parent wants a proud child. Both this research and literature indicate that humility is one of the much-needed character traits parents need to develop in their children.

4.   Confidence

This study also established that confidence is an important character trait that all the mothers said a child should have. During interviews, the participant mothers all pointed out that their children should be confident. The reasons they gave were that confidence would make their children archive and go far in life. They also reported that confident people always get respect and get listened to in the community. In the Ndau community confidence is a required trait especially among boys and men.

This observation by the mothers was also reinforced and supported in the interviews when the grandmothers spoke of the experiences of children who showed confidence from early childhood have become, citing names of personalities in their communities. Grandmother GM3 highlighted that confident children grow to be leaders and businessman in our community; they are not shy to present and discuss important issues. Mothers should set the cultural learning environment that supports their children's development of confidence and self-esteem. The grandmothers emphasised the need for children to have confidence in the following verbal quotes:

> I know there are many things children need to learn in life over and above goes in their lessons at school. Their first lessons should start at home where they are taught Hunhu and confidence. This knowledge must first come from the parents especially mothers because they take care of the children from birth. Mothers here and those at home must make sure their children learn confidence and responsibility lessons so they will grow up respected and successful adults.

Findings of this study confirm Idang's (2015) findings that the well-being and holistic development of society in terms of culture and values are established and sustained the character education of the young. Consistent with the findings of the study Street (2015) also earlier found that having positive self-esteem has a strong correlation to behaviour and happiness, hence teaching a child to have confidence is important. In addition, the literature shows that there is a strong relationship between how a child feels about himself and how he acts (Perman, 2011; Cherry, 2018). Hence it was found vital by Ndau mothers to teach their children to be confident.

5.   Resilience

This study also established that the mothers exposed resilience as one of the important character traits to be developed by Ndau children. Most of the mothers 18 out of the 24 pointed out that Resilience is a virtue in a growing child. Representing the mothers' perception during focus group discussions participants stated that:

> *A child needs to be strong and resilient in life. A person meets many challenges during childhood and when one becomes an adult, and all these require resilience. 'munhu ndewekumira se dhodha'; meaning a person should face challenges with resilience and persistence. A person who is resilient succeed in life, because such a person is determined (M13).*

> *A child should learn to be resilient. When children are resilient, they can better handle the traumas and challenges of life even at that young age. Ndau people are hunters, 'vavhimi' although nowadays people hunt money, so one has to be resilient (M5)*

From the above-mentioned snippets of conversation, it is seen that the mother participants uphold resilience as an important character trait for a growing child. These finding on resilience were also found by Salmansohn (2019) and Street (5015) that children can also experience hard life, hence, everyone needs some level of resilience in order to go through rough times. Hence, the parents reported that they tried to protect their children from harm, but teaching them resilience, because in the participance's view the character trait would save them in the future.

6.   Resourcefulness

In this study mothers and grandmothers were in agreement that resourcefulness is a significant character trait to be acquired by children growing up in the Ndau community. The mothers reported that the Ndau people have always been curious, hardworking and resourceful since time immemorial. They maintained that

children need to be taken care of, but in their little ways, they should show qualities of being able to take care of some of their needs. During focus group discussions mother M7 stated:

We take care of our children in most respect, but a child should be resourceful. A child should not be lazy and idle. He is expected to be hardworking and resourceful. This will help a child do something appreciated in life.

This was complemented by a grandmother during interviews who pointed out that:

'Mwana ndewe kushangazhika, kwete kungopeta maoko,' meaning that a child should be resourceful and not just being idle. He should be able to solve minor challenges. Yes, a child can be given everything by their parents, but the mother must see to it that the child is taught to be resourceful (GM1).

The sentiments expressed above reveal that the majority of the participants find resourcefulness to be an imperative character trait for children. These findings resonate with those of Barends (2002); Street (2015) and Idang (2015) that finding solutions to problems is aa important trait that even businesses look for it in employees. In the view of Street (2015), curiosity and resourcefulness traits should be developed in childhood because curiosity reduced is a future denied. Henceforth, parents must nurture this trait in their children through assigning them minor tasks that require them to be creative and resourceful.

Conclusion

Findings from the data collected revealed that six-character traits were identified as important to be possessed by a Ndau child. Most of the mothers and grandmothers were concerned and were educating their children for holistic development, success, and acceptance in the Ndau community. Ndau mothers consider schooling as important, but it is only an aspect of the child's entire education. The mothers were of the view that there are character traits children needed to acquire to be all-rounded and successful people in life. Hence, it was concluded that the six identified traits: responsibility, altruism, assertiveness, confidence, resilience, and resourcefulness needed to be learned early in a child's life and continued to be developed till the children reach adulthood.

Recommendations derived from this study

Based on the findings made in this study, the following recommendations were made:

- Parents in the Ndau community should continue to mentor their own children for the children to develop requisite character traits starting from early childhood.
- More research on different indigenous communities' perception of ideal personality traits still needs to be undertaken in Zimbabwe.

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