

The Experiences of Parents in South Africa During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Ecological Systems Perspective

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Abstract

COVID-19 has caused havoc on the stability of families in South Africa. Although researchers have explored the impacts of the pandemic worldwide, no studies have been done to explore the COVID-19 experiences of parents in South Africa. The exploration of parents' lived experiences from an ecological perspective can provide insight to researchers and policy makers on how best to empower parents. Furthermore, it can provide a comprehensive understanding about parents' lived experiences during a pandemic in a developing country. The research question was: 'What are the lived experiences of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa?'. The study was qualitative in nature, participants were recruited from four provinces in South Africa using non-probability, purposive sampling methods. Data was gathered using one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and subsequently analysed using Creswell's (2014) model of thematic analysis. The findings from the study indicate both negative and positive experiences around the following issues: COVID-19 perceptions, relationships and spouse relationships, connections and lost connections, changes in routine, financial status, education, and positive experiences. The article concludes that comprehensive interventions for empowering parents during pandemics should be developed.

Keywords: Ecological systems, Parents, Lived experiences, South Africa, COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 has caused massive suffering and a severe disruption of family life. Most parents struggled to cope with the consequences of the pandemic that attacked them abruptly and found them unprepared. The pandemic upset bio-ecological systems, resulting in reduced health, relationships, and financial outcomes. This has crippled and undermined the capacity of parents to guarantee the livelihoods of family members, especially children. Whilst several researchers have highlighted the impact of the pandemic, there has been no study that has explored and described the lived experiences of parents in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic using the ecological systems framework.

The impacts of COVID-19 have been globally experienced and widely researched with researchers identifying biological, psychological, social, and socioeconomic effects of the pandemic.

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Several researchers have explored the impacts of the COVID-19 on parents, children, and families. However, few research studies have explored the lived experiences of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic in low-income countries like South Africa (Weaver & Swank, 2021). Most studies have been conducted in developed countries. Consequently, little is known about the lived experiences of parents within a developing country like South Africa (Alonzo et al., 2021).

The pandemic management strategies implemented by the government of South Africa, which included lock-down, and quarantine, put families under strain. Due to social distance measures, parents were distanced from their support structures, increasing their distress and lowering their parenting capabilities (Weaver & Swank, 2021). Although parents may have retained a virtual connection with others, they lost physical assistance. Family interaction, including routines, rituals, and rules, may have been disrupted by pandemic-related changes (Weaver & Swank, 2021). The stay-at-home orders shifted family schedules, with children virtually attending school and parents working from home. Routines were disrupted by social distance restrictions, prompting families to adjust.

The Ecological System Theory

The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), which states that an individual's development occurs within several interrelated systems. The four ecological systems are: the microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, and macrosystem, which are interrelated, interact with, and influence an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological perspective is influenced by the theory that no individual lives in isolation, acknowledging that individuals interact with their environments and are shaped by them. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a threat to supporting systems and environments and evidence suggests that this may have detrimental effects on individuals and children's development (Haleemunnissa et al., 2021).

According to Barrow (2017), it is a parent's capacity to support their child that either enhances or diminishes their development. Research has indicated that parents have been faced with major pandemic related stressors which, consequently, has impacted their overall wellbeing and their capacities to support their children's development (Kerr et al., 2021). The pandemic related stressors are evident throughout the various ecological systems and will be unpacked throughout the paper. This ecological systems framework allowed the researchers to understand how COVID-19 has influenced and shaped parents, and how parents have responded to a pandemic impacted environment.

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Families

Increased Exacerbated Stressors, Burnout and Mental Health

COVID-19 has exacerbated stressors for families around the globe (Kerr et al., 2021). Stressors such as job instability, fear of infection, and food insecurity have led to an increase in parental distress and reports of mental health problems (Kerr et al., 2021). Researchers have indicated an increase in reported psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and an increased tendency to worry (Mortazavi & Ghardashi, 2021). The measures implemented to mitigate the spread of the virus led to an erosion of family connections, support, routines and heightened stressors (Cuartas, 2020). According to Kerr et al., (2021), the pandemic has magnified parental stress and burnout which directly impacts child stress and psychopathology. Researchers have found that parents with anxiety were seven

times more likely to report that their children were experiencing emotional problems (Saddik et al., 2021).

Impacts on Families from Low-Income Countries

Research has indicated that mental health symptoms were significantly higher in low-income countries due to their pre-pandemic risk of mental health challenges that are associated with exposure to poverty, crime, abuse, lack of food security, and resources (Alonzo et al., 2021). Kerr et al., (2021), identified that ethnic minority and low-income families are at a higher risk of experiencing psychological symptoms. Despite this, the only study that has been conducted in a low-income country that explored the mental health impact of COVID-19 on parents was in Guatemala (Alonzo et al., 2021). The study stressed the importance of addressing parental stress in high-risk communities to alleviate parental psychological distress because it has a direct correlation to child maltreatment (Alonzo et al., 2021). Similar to Guatemala, South Africa's population has a higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, and insomnia compared to other countries (Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial that studies explore parental stress in high-risk contexts to provide support to parents and prevent possible child maltreatment.

The Socio-economic Impacts on Families

The stay-at-home lockdowns and social distancing regulations had a rippling effect on family relationships and social interactions (Kerr et al., 2021). Previous research has indicated that parental support and perceived control are resilient factors that assist parents and families in managing the stressors associated with COVID-19. Socialization is considered to be a protective factor for individuals' well-being, however, the social distancing and the closing of institutions such as churches and schools have eroded support systems (Cheng, Moon & Artman, 2020). With little support, parents have had to take on the role of educator to their children who were learning remotely whilst managing their full-time occupations (Haleemunnissa et al., 2021). In some instances, this dual role has caused negative interactions to occur between parents and their children as a result of burnout and parental distress (Russell et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is evident that parents have had to adapt to the ongoing changes during lockdown which have included adapting their work schedule, finances, routines, and their social lives (Vanderhout et al., 2020).

The pandemic has exacerbated current hardship for parents, revealing entrenched socioeconomic inequalities of access to healthcare, education, food security, and service delivery, complicated by the additional challenges of a co-existing global pandemic (Mlambo & Khuzwayo, 2021). The closure of educational institutions and non-essential work created mass disruption in families (Ishmael et al., 2020). Parents from low-income households who relied on informal sectors experienced temporary suspension in work, for some, this meant a loss in their livelihoods (Achuo et al., 2020).

Method

This section focuses on describing and explaining the research methodology and process. It discusses the research design and approach selected for this study. It also focuses on the selection of participants and the procedures used to collect and analyses data. Ethical considerations pertinent to the study are also discussed in this section.

The Research Goal and Aim

The purpose of the study was to provide a detailed description of the lived experiences of parents within a South African context during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the goal of this study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of parents in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main research aim was to contextualise and conceptualise the lived experiences of parents from an ecological systems approach.

Research Questions

The main research question was: What are the lived experiences of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa? The sub-questions that assisted the researchers in answering the main research question are as follows:

1. How to contextualize and conceptualize parents' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic from an Ecological Systems Theory?
2. What are the positive experiences of parents in South Africa during the pandemic?
3. What coping strategies did parents utilize during the course of the pandemic?
4. What were the concerns and challenges that South African parents experienced during the pandemic?
5. What meanings have parents constructed from their experiences during the pandemic?
6. How may parents' lived experiences during the pandemic assist policy makers and researchers in the future?

Research Design

The study was qualitative in nature, specifically, a phenomenological research design was utilised. Qualitative research enabled the researchers to explore lived experiences of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. A phenomenological research design was used to explore and gain a comprehensive understanding of the subjective experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological research design enabled the researchers to explore, describe, contextualise, and interpret the phenomenon of the lived experiences of parents in South Africa during a pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

The population for the study was all parents in South Africa. However, it was not feasible to include all parents in the study. Therefore, a non-probability, the purposive sampling method was used to select and recruit participants for the study (Babbie, 2016). Purposive sampling enabled the researchers to intentionally select individuals who could provide an abundance of information suited for the study (Babbie, 2016). The following sampling criteria was used: participants older than the age of 25; South African citizen; proficiency in English; the child's biological or legally adopted parent/s; parent to one or more children younger than 18 years of age; has been residing in South Africa during the pandemic.

A sample of 8 parents residing in the four highlighted provinces in South Africa was recruited. Data became saturated after the eighth interview. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the South African College of Applied Psychology (reference number: MSCL010322).

Data Collection Procedure

The participants were recruited via the following social media platforms: Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The advertisement was uploaded onto these platforms which highlighted the nature of the study, the eligibility criteria, and the researchers' contact details. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study contacted the researchers via the social media platform or directly using their listed contact details. Then the participants were screened by the researchers to ensure that they met the eligibility criteria, thereafter they received an email containing a consent form, as well given an opportunity to ask any further questions regarding the study.

Once the participants sent their signed consent forms to the researchers, the researchers responded with an email giving the participants a one-week period where they were able to choose a time slot for an interview to be conducted with one of the respective researchers. Thereafter, a follow-up email containing the Zoom meeting link was sent a few days before the scheduled meeting. A day before the scheduled meeting, the participants were sent a reminder email about the scheduled meeting. On the day of the meetings, the researchers logged into the Zoom meetings 15 minutes before the scheduled time and once the participant joined, the data collection procedure began. The zoom meetings varied between 30 minutes to 60 minutes, allowing the participants sufficient time to answer the semi-structured interview questions.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and later transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. At the conclusion of each interview, the interview recording and the informed consent forms were uploaded to a secure Google Drive. Furthermore, the researchers uploaded their field notes that are written prior to the data collection procedure, during, and after the interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed by the researchers, they were uploaded to Google Drive. The Google Drive was only accessed through an authorised link which only the researchers had access to.

Data Collection Method: Semi-structured Interviews

Data was collected using one-on-one virtual semi-structured interviews. The interview schedule was used to guide a systematic method of data collection, whilst accommodating a flexible approach to encourage the exploration of South African parents' lived experiences during the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to facilitate the elaboration of these experiences and possible meanings that have been constructed while allowing for a holistic conceptualization of the 'lived experiences of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa'. The interview guides were formulated based on a literature review and sought to accomplish the aim of the study and answer the research questions. The open-ended questions mostly focused on the parents' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Analysis

Creswell's (2014) six-step model of thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data. This model utilises systems of identification, formulation, and classification to perform a thematic analysis through which we can consolidate the empirical data into worked descriptions encompassing the

phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2014). The following steps outline a systematic process toward thematic analysis that was used to process the data obtained from the 8 participants.

Step 1. The collected data was organized by the researchers for analysis by means of transcribing the Zoom meeting interview data, as well as the field notes.

Step 2. The researchers read through the data in order to gain an initial understanding of the data. Noting a preliminary sense of the general ideas, their tones, and the credibility of these ideas

Step 3. The data were then coded using a Program called MAXQDA 2022. The data was then organized into relevant and meaningful pieces and placed into categories that were labeled with a single word.

Step 4. The following setting, people, categories, and themes were described in the data analysis.

Step 5. The researchers considered the best way of representing the themes and descriptions in the findings. Therefore, involving a detailed discussion of the themes.

Step 6. A comprehensive interpretation of the findings was therefore presented, highlighting the conclusions and future recommendations from the study.

For confirming and verifying the results of qualitative analysis and ensuring that the provided findings are trustworthy, the researchers used transferability and reflectivity. To maintain a valid and rigorous study, the researcher presented their identified themes to one of the participants as part of a member-checking strategy. A bracketing strategy was also employed by writing in a diary about researchers' preconceptions, feelings, and field notes. In addition, the researchers had to re-read the interviews and transcripts and reflect on the possible meanings and biases of the participants and themselves (Barrow, 2017). Two types of triangulations were employed in the study, a) data triangulation (i.e., semi-structured interviews) and b) theory triangulation (i.e., phenomenology and Ecological Systems Theory).

Complementary to the bracketing strategy is the practice of reflectivity, in which it is the responsibility of the researcher to be cognisant of their position as a facilitator of knowledge and how the phenomena being investigated are presented. Reflexivity requires a process of critical examination of the judgments and interpretations made during the research process, which assesses the researchers' inherent and preconceived ideas, thoughts, and emotions that can influence the findings of the researcher and their interactions with research participants (Creswell, 2014). By documenting the preconceptions, feelings, thoughts, and fieldnotes in a diary, transparency can be emphasized, and further enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research report and deepen the understanding of the phenomena.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the entire research process, the researchers adhered to ethical considerations. The researchers respected the dignity and worth of each participant and stakeholders involved in the research study and strived to preserve and protect their human rights in a professional manner. The researchers respected the participants' right to hold different opinions, values or beliefs from their own.

The following steps were taken to ensure that participants' identities were kept anonymous throughout the research process and the reporting of the findings. During the one-on-one interviews, the researchers allowed the participants to keep their camera off if they preferred doing so. In addition,

the participants' anonymity was concealed by providing the participants with pseudonyms which ensured that no one will be able to identify the participants after the study. This measure ensured that the participants' identities and personal information was safeguarded.

The researchers upheld the principle of confidentiality by handling information in a confidential manner. This includes the collection and storing of data from the participants, therefore, the researchers could under no circumstances interview participants or record interviews without the participants written and verbal consent. Permission was granted from participants to record interview sessions for transcription purposes. The audio and/or video recording was uploaded to a google drive that only the researchers had access to and was secured using a password. This was done promptly after the interview had been recorded. Once all the interviews had been transcribed into a written document, the researchers permanently deleted the audios and/or videos from the google drive. The transcribed interview and additional interview notes were uploaded and stored on a restricted Google Drive that only the researchers will have access to for the next five years, thereafter it will be destroyed.

To respect the participants' right to autonomy and to protect their welfare, the researchers provided all participants with a consent form at the beginning of the study. During the data collection procedure, the researchers ensured that written consent was received from the participants before any interview was scheduled. The researchers also asked the participants for their verbal consent to record the semi-structured interviews and for their permission to store the data. In addition, the participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions before the commencement of the study and during the investigation.

Each participant received a consent form that informed them a) on the nature of the research, b) their voluntary participation c) their right to decline participation, and d) withdrawing from the research.

The researchers valued the participants' rights and therefore, were candid with the participants about the research process and how it might have potentially affected them. The researchers ensured that they were transparent about the purpose and objectives of the study, and avoided any forms of deception. The potential risks to participants in the study may have included feelings of discomfort as a result of discussing sensitive topics. However, the foreseeable risks in this study were very minimal. Should participants have experienced any distress and required debriefing sessions, the researchers were accordingly going to refer them to organisations that could have assisted them in debriefing. However, no participant needed any form of debriefing.

Biographic Details of Participants

The biographical information of the participants related to this study is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 A Presentation of the Biographical Information of Participants

Participants	Gender	Race	Location	Highest Education	Occupation	No. of Children
Participant 1	Female	White	Pretoria	University Degree	Housewife	2
Participant 2	Female	White	Cape Town	University Degree	Communications	2

Participant 3	Male	White	Pretoria	University Degree	Compliance office	1
Participant 4	Female	White	Cape Town	University Degree	Administrator	2
Participant 5	Female	White	Bloemfontein	University Degree	Own business	2
Participant 6	Female	White	Western Cape	University Degree	Teacher	1
Participant 7	Male	White	Pretoria	High School	Engineer	2
Participant 8	Female	Indian	Cape Town	University Degree	Designer	1

In this study, there were a total of 8 participants, with females accounting for 80 percent of the overall population and males accounting for just 20 percent. There was only one Indian participant among the entire group of white Caucasians. The majority of the participants already had two children, while a small number of participants only had one. They all had some level of higher education background, with seven of eight obtaining a university degree.

Findings

Seven themes were identified among the 8 participants with additionally, two subthemes. The themes were: perceptions of COVID-19; relationships and with a sub theme spouse relationship; connections and lost connections; routine changes; financial changes and education; positive experiences. The findings of the study are discussed below. Pseudonyms were used in this section to guarantee participant confidentiality.

Theme 1: Perceptions of COVID-19

The majority of participants were concerned about the COVID-19 outbreak; they were worried about being infected. However, just a handful thought it would be life-threatening or serious. Participants reported significant levels of concern when it came to explaining the virus to their children, and thought the lockdown was necessary in some ways but that it was exaggerated. After learning about the virus, most participants increased their use of hygiene techniques and social distancing.

The participants talked about how they would inform their children about COVID-19, and talked about their emotional reactions to Covid-19 and their early emotions about it. Jane clearly stated that they told the truth to the children: *“They knew what was going on. We told them from the start what was happening in the world and my husband’s best friend actually stays in China. So, we knew about COVID a bit before everyone started talking about it here. So, we talked about COVID with them before the pandemic actually started in our country”*. Nadine also said being honest was a good approach for their family. However, Christine said that having a medical understanding made it much easier for her to explain the pandemic to her children. She said, *“Yes explain to them from a medical side or health side what it is [referring to the virus] that they are looking at and why we do what we do, to just break it down a bit, so it doesn't feel like we're on a different planet”*.

Others tried to explain it in a sense that an 8-year-old would understand, Lily explained by saying *“I told him that there is a big ... type of germs out there and is very bad. It's very, very bad, so we're not allowed to go in front of our house”*. They however made sure he was aware that he would be safe around them, whilst still telling him where one cannot go. Parents also stated that their children

were first terrified by what was said at school or outside their houses, and that the children did not always comprehend what was going on in the world until it was explained to them. Nadine also said, *“Bad connection that everybody with COVID is going to pass away, I think that frightened my little girl.”*

The majority of participants stated that they implemented small changes at first, such as sanitising and mask wearing. Sharon shared, *“We’ve made a lot of changes, whether it be just the normal or like sanitizing all the time or things like that. But we’re more cautious just physically, you know about what we touch”*.

Theme 2: Relationships

Participants indicated that COVID-19 has affected relationships. These ranged from spouses and partners to co-workers, friends, and acquaintances. The relationships were affected in a variety of ways, including frequency of contact and emotional closeness. Face-to-face connections were generally limited to primary network members, such as partners and family members, during the peak of COVID-19 restrictions such as the Lockdown. Some 'weak' links were lost, and interactions began growing more limited to those closest.

Changes in relationships with family members, notably spouses, were reported by the participants. Jane commented; *“So we still have a normal relationship with them. Friends wise, yeah, like I said, we had a few friends that we haven’t seen now since COVID started ... we miss them.”* However, Lily commented, *“I guess a lot of relationships actually grew closer because everybody was in the same boat and everybody could relate to what was going on, so I guess that forced us a lot to chat and reach out virtually, so, a lot of the relationships actually grew closer and deeper”*.

Participants also stated that their relationships with the children was affected. However, there were many positive sides. Parents struggled with adjusting how to engage or communicate with their children. Mandi stated, *“I had to navigate how to communicate with the children and teach myself how to approach each child differently in order to get a positive outcome.”*

Sub-theme 2.1: Spouse Relationships

Parents shared different perceptions of the effects on their spousal relationship. Sharon remarked, *“It wasn’t all easy, but our relationship was stronger and better, so for me it was all good in the end.”* Josh commented, *“As a married couple it was difficult because the way in which you coped was different. She would like to avoid where you would like to engage...”* Additionally, Chris stated, *“So, luckily my wife and I bounce each other off with regards to that, which really helped.”* Sharon mentioned, *“I think it was definitely a positive impact because we definitely started relying on each other a lot more”*. The fact that needing to now rely on just one another was beneficial for their relationships.

Theme 3: Connections

Social support and social interaction is an important method by which social ties improve health. In fact, one of the most crucial resilience components in the aftermath of stressful events has been found to be social support. The normal ways in which people connected and got social support

have been substantially disrupted in the specific instance of COVID-19 and the Lockdown in South Africa.

Parents discussed their connections with others and the different changes. Christine mentioned, *"Connections changed, there was a shift in who you like to surround yourself with, true friends, people that matter...quality relationships.* In pandemic times, participants started realising who their true friends are and who is willing to put in the effort to remain connected and in touch. Participants also had to select which ties to pursue and preserve and which ones to let go of. Josh also shared, *"But if you actually just focus for a bit. You see this...everybody is just selfish, you know. And this just brought it out. And you know the friendships we have? That's good, went deeper and we lost a lot of them ... now we can see that there's no value to this and we just walk away."*

Sub-theme 3.1: Lost Connections

Participants voiced their concerns with their lack of connection and support. Jane shared: *"We've lost a few people...that were closely connected to us but I think when we started hearing about people that passed away from COVID, then it really hit home".* Josh said, *"The major challenge was the loss of emotional and physical connection that you used to have with family and friends."*

Participants also mentioned that children felt the biggest connection loss of friends and interactions. Sharon stated, *"The children need interaction with children their own age".* Some participants mentioned that they lost contact with other parents due to the closing of schools; this was a negative experience because these are the people who used to provide them with a support system. Nadine stated, *"...I mean also as a parent I guess that you lose that interaction with another fellow parent."*

Theme 4: Routine Changes

The participants shared how their lifestyle, routines, roles, and responsibilities had changed because of the pandemic. Chris said, *"I cope with this with this new environment, working with my wife at home. You know which we've never done. So, I think that first few weeks was quiet, I think it was an easy, easy three weeks for me."* Some challenges with regards to routine changes began when after school care closed whilst their jobs continued. This made participants to struggle balancing their everyday routines. Lily stated, *"All of a sudden there was no aftercare whilst me and my husband were still going to work, well, work goes on."*

Theme 5: Financial Status

Parents shared their different financial changes, struggles and privileges. Christine stated, *"My husband did not survive the pandemic, there were financial concerns with his business."*

Not all participants had negative financial experience, Nadine voiced, *"We were blessed, we didn't have any financial implications."* She stated that they were lucky enough to have benefited from the pandemic by means of owning a cleaning company that did sanitising during the lockdown. Other participants used the pandemic to sensitise their children to recognise their privileges. Lily shared an example of a play station that their son desired, but he had to earn it and was not simply allowed to just

get it, she mentioned, *“So he understood his privileges, his circumstances were better than of other kids during the pandemic.”*

Theme 6: Education

The transition from in-person to virtual education was viewed by participants as being of a significant impact to them. Although there were two participants who either already did home schooling or considered it long before the pandemic and lockdown, most participants had children in public schools and found the adaption from face-to-face to online easy with minor difficulties. Parents expressed their thankfulness towards teachers and emphasised the extra mile that most teachers did to make the transition to online learning much easier for parents. Jane stated, *“I am a stay-at-home mom, and we also homeschool our kids.”* The following are positive comments, as well as a few challenges that the parents faced during the pandemic and lockdown with regards to their children transitioning to online education. Christine commented, *“So now your day is not concentrating only on your work because you need to complete the schoolwork as well with the kids. So, your lunch hour is now a school hour and after hours you need to make sure everything is fine.”* However, Mandi had a different experience, she stated, *“Teachers and schools really went the extra mile during the pandemic, uhm, structuring, ...resources, lessons...resources for the little ones, making it so practical as possible for them.”*

Because most of the participants had very young children, the responses regarding school adaptation were rather favorable, and not many struggled to help their children adapt to online learning, many stated that it was simpler to track their children's development online. Mandi stated, *“Because a lot of the schools had to throw stuff on the Internet, so it was a real cool way for us to measure where we are because especially when they small there's not a real syllabus that you're following and exams and stuff.”*

It is clear from the findings that having to home school children during the pandemic had both positive and negative consequences.

Theme 7: Positive Experiences

During the pandemic, parents recounted their positive experiences and special occasions. Christine reflected on her positive experiences as follows, *“I had very much more quality family time.”* Josh claimed, *“I never realised how strong you (woman) actually are and how much you can endure, you know and uhm, I guess that was such a heart-warming experience for me.”* Lily added that the pandemic had a positive outcome of realising who is important in life, she said, *“The pandemic also made you realise that uhm, the people that matters are the people at home. And, and that is so, that's just so nice knowing that you don't have to go out, the pandemic also showed you who are the people who really matter to you”.*

Other positive experiences were related to flexibility of work, Chris mentioned that he now has the opportunity to work virtually for a company internationally in the UK and believes that he does not think that it would have happened if it was not for the pandemic and lockdowns forcing people to use online platform, he reflected, *“It's quite cool, so I think the world has changed for the better”.* For most participants, positive experiences were the extra time they got to spend with loved ones' and what they learned from one another in this time. Sharon shared that they had an opportunity to spend quality time

with their newborn baby without needing to share her with the world for a short while, she said, *“Being able to just sort of be home with the baby, and to do all of that. That was also, you know, quite good.”*

Discussion of Findings

The study explored parents' lived experiences during the pandemic in South Africa. Seven themes and two subthemes were discovered by the researchers. The experiences ranged from social support groups and relationships with spouses and children, to positive experiences and adjustment to online education for children. There are clear links to past study literature; nevertheless, socioeconomic stresses were not as prevalent as projected in earlier research done in other countries. According to Vanderhout et al., (2020), the COVID-19 epidemic has had a particularly negative impact on children and families. While children appear to have milder impacts from COVID-19 than adults, abrupt changes in routines, resources, and relationships because of limits on physical engagement have had significant consequences for families with young children.

Children's social and support networks have been severely disrupted due to a lack of school, childcare, extracurricular activities, and family gatherings. Additional duties for parents as they adjust to their new roles as instructors and playmates while managing full-time caregiving with their own difficult shifts in job, financial, and social situations have added to the stress caused by COVID-19. The shifting emotional states were the subject of the first theme found in the study. This aligns to the findings of a study by Golberstein et al., (2020), who found that during the pandemic, both parents and children experienced increased levels of emotional anguish. When it came to explaining the matter to their children, the parents struggled and discussed how they would do it. Some parents went right to the point and told it like it was, while others attempted to explain things in a way that their children could comprehend.

During the early phases of the pandemic, many participants thought the lockdown had been prolonged unnecessarily and may have been implemented too soon, but they also exhibited a high level of adoption of preventive measures, as well as a willingness and perceived ability to self-isolate. To attain high adherence to these preventive actions in these groups, tailored public health messaging and interventions are required.

Participants expressed concern about future adult-child relationships. The ramifications of this unprecedented reliance on virtual connections are unknown. The sensation of emotional connection and closeness with other people is referred to as intimacy. Emotional connection, whether through sexual, friendship, or familial interactions, satisfies a basic human need while also providing significant health benefits, such as less stress, enhanced mental health, lower blood pressure, and a lower risk of heart disease. Companionship and proximity provide essential intimacy for mental health. Positively, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided opportunity for participants to (re)connect and (re)strengthen intimate relationships inside their families by spending quality time together when many common external social activities were put on hold. According to research, the first full lockdown period resulted in a significant improvement in the quality of stable relationships across the community (Greyling et al., 2021). During the lockdown, most parents said their relationships with their partners and children improved, though they did encounter small barriers and problems.

Infectious disease pandemics, such as COVID-19, necessitate intrapersonal behaviour changes and pose highly complicated public health concerns. A pandemic of an airborne sickness spreads rapidly through social contact, causing chaos in human relationships by significantly altering how people interact (Long et al., 2022). Participants described strengthening their bonds with their close family in the third theme, connections, which could be a benefit of the pandemic (Fegert et al., 2020). Researchers discovered an inverse association between parental intimacy and sadness, anxiety, and stress levels in their offspring (Wu et al., 2020).

Participants reported a deeper level of connection with others, as well as a loss of connection, as social distancing affects connecting with others outside the home. Connection and support are nevertheless vital in the face of this loss (Fegert et al., 2020). The study found that participants lost contact with other parents at school who could have assisted them with their children's difficulties. This also hindered their ability to communicate with people outside of their core connections. Meanwhile, online forms of social support are not geographically limited, allowing for interactions and social support from a larger group of people. Formal online social support spaces (e.g., support groups) existed long before COVID-19, but their popularity has skyrocketed since then. While online contacts can boost social support perceptions, it's uncertain whether distant communication technologies can replace in-person engagement during times of social isolation (Long et al., 2022). Therefore, some parents kept in contact with connections outside of their core relationships and they did not lose all connections with others. It is all too simple to flick on the TV or surf through social media while self-isolating. Trying to connect with people and exhibit compassion and solidarity, on the other hand, makes one to feel better and benefits everyone.

In the Fourth theme, participants talked about taking on new roles that came with their own set of obstacles (e.g., teaching) that is discussed in more detail in the 6th theme. Some participants discussed the advantages of spending more time at home and developing a new routine with their partner to combine work and childcare. Participants acknowledged the need for more structure at home in terms of family routine. Routines are vital in times of uncertainty because they provide a sense of normalcy and can help people cope (Harrist et al., 2019). Morning meetings, to-do lists, and teaching "life lessons" are all part of routines. The slower ~~the~~ pace and fewer activities allows parents to spend more time with their families. This is seen as a benefit of the epidemic by some (Fegert et al., 2020). Researchers have reported the consequences of the pandemic on work–family balance, as well as an inverse link between marital satisfaction and levels of sadness, anxiety, and stress (Craig & Churchill, 2021).

Participants talked about their financial status, their capacity to work/stay at home, and their health. Individuals in specific work sectors (e.g., restaurants, transportation) have been identified as being the most affected by social distancing practices (Vavra, 2020). In this study, most parents had professional careers and were not financially affected by the pandemic.

As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, educational institutions have collapsed, and instruction has shifted drastically to distance learning. Students from low-income households and those who live in rural areas, on the other hand, have restricted access to the technology required for online learning. The study found that some participants had previously done home schooling and that it was not difficult; however, some participants struggled with the phenomenon of home schooling, which meant that they were actively required to assist the children with schoolwork. Therefore, a large part of routine changes was where parents now had to take on the roles as educators in the household. On a lighter note, the participants recognised the benefits of the new learning setup because it assures the protection of their

children while also strengthening family relationships. This links with the positive experiences of participants as well as child-adult relationships.

Lastly, the high and low experiences that the participants and their families experienced reflect reactions to the pandemic's negative (social isolation) and positive (more family time) effects. Positive experiences were however mentioned by participants, which should not be disregarded. Many parents, for example, reported feeling connected to their children than before the pandemic. This is relevant since the quality of parent–child relationships can safeguard the negative effects of stress and negative behaviours on both parents and children (Kerr et al., 2021).

Limitations

The findings of this study should be viewed in light of their limitations. Firstly, because this study used non-random sampling and a small sample size, the participants are not representative of the entire South African population of parents. Secondly, there was a limited amount of participant diversity due to most participants being White and female. Furthermore, most participants were in the professional fields and were able to work from home. Parents of primary school-aged children who had access to virtual learning or children who did not require online learning made up the majority of participants. Parents of high school students who needed daily online learning, for example, could be included in future studies.

Conclusion

The pandemic necessitates research about how parents feel and negotiate this experience. The COVID-19 epidemic has posed significant hurdles to the parents and families. The pandemic forced the closure of schools and a major shift in educational methods to online learning epidemic. The COVID-19 epidemic has had a particularly negative impact on children and families, interrupting routines, affecting relationships and roles, and causing changes to normal childcare, school, and leisure activities.

Parents who are learning to adapt to this new way of living by facing distinct problems along with positive experiences. Parents may manage the pandemic with the help of resources and assistance, developing positive coping skills and family interactions.

Recommendations

Due to the small number of participants, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to all South African parents. Future research could include a broader geographic scope, particularly in rural regions, as well as a combination of survey methods to accommodate parents of different races and income levels. A follow-up study may be conducted to investigate the pandemic's long-term effects.

The findings of the study underline the importance of parents being supported during a global pandemic. Future interventions that assist parents in navigating the demands of day-to-day life should be designed from an ecological systems perspective to be comprehensive, efficient, and effective in supporting parents during future times of crisis. The interventions should aim to promote parents to a) have positive outlooks b) seek support, c) maintain the family systems through utilising planning strategies, and d) conflict resolution.

Policy makers should develop policies aimed at supporting parents during pandemics in collaboration with parents, giving them a voice. Such policies should be drawn from an ecological systems perspective and take into consideration the micro, macro, mezzo, and chrono impacts of the pandemic.

Social workers and social service providers should be trained on crisis intervention and disaster management to raise their competency in supporting families during pandemics.

Implications and Significance

Covid-19 has caused various impacts on the socio-economic, psychological, social, and physical aspects of parents' and children's lives. Therefore, the study contributes to the literature and provide insight into the lived experiences of South African parents during the Covid-19 pandemic, which will assist professionals and policy makers in formulating policies geared towards the establishment of interventions and programmes for supporting parents and children during pandemics, disasters, and other times of disruption.

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