

Original Research Paper

Continuities and Discontinuities in Post-Apartheid Parenting in South Africa

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Article History

Received:
12.11.2025

Revised:
30.12.2025

Accepted:
17.01.2026

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Abstract: This study explores the continuities and discontinuities in post-apartheid parenting in South Africa, examining how colonial and apartheid legacies continue to shape family life while intersecting with contemporary social, economic, and cultural changes. Guided by postcolonial theory and a transformative paradigm, the research employed a qualitative case study design, engaging 30 participants, including young adults, parents, and professionals involved in child-rearing. Data were generated through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, then analysed thematically to identify enduring and emergent parenting practices. Findings reveal that traditional communal values, moral instruction, and relational care rooted in Ubuntu persist alongside evolving norms shaped by children's rights legislation, urbanization, globalization, and digital media exposure. Disciplinary practices, gender roles, and parental authority reflect both intergenerational continuities and negotiated adaptations, with tensions arising between preserving cultural norms and embracing rights-based, democratic approaches. Participants highlighted hybrid parenting strategies that blend indigenous values with contemporary developmental frameworks and emphasized the importance of schools, religious institutions, and community structures in supporting child-rearing. The study underscores the need for a uniquely South African parenting model that harmonizes Ubuntu-based principles with modern notions of child autonomy, positive discipline, and social responsibility. By documenting how history, culture, and socio-political transformation intersect in parenting, this research provides insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners seeking to strengthen culturally grounded and contextually responsive family practices in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: Colonial Legacy, Child Discipline, Cultural Continuity, Post-Apartheid Parenting, Parenting Hybridity.



1. Introduction

Parenting practices are deeply embedded within the socio-cultural, political, and economic structures of society. In many formerly colonized nations, colonial rule profoundly disrupted indigenous child-rearing systems, replacing them with foreign models rooted in Western ideologies of discipline, authority, gender norms, and family structure [1] [2]. Colonial administrations imposed Eurocentric family ideals through missionary education, Christian doctrines, and legal systems, often marginalizing communal and extended kinship-based parenting that characterized African, Asian, and Latin American societies [3] [4].

In the post-colonial period, these colonial legacies have persisted to varying extents. In some contexts, Western parenting norms have been internalized and maintained, while in others, indigenous child-rearing values have been revitalized or blended with contemporary global influences [5] [6]. For instance, the emphasis on authoritarian discipline once normalized in colonial schools and mission homes continues in some post-colonial households, despite the global shift toward rights-based and child-centred approaches [7] [8].

However, the transformation of parenting norms is far from uniform. It is shaped by intersecting forces such as urbanization, globalization, economic instability, educational access, and shifting gender relations, all of which complicate simplistic binaries of tradition versus modernity [9]. While prior research has examined broad patterns in post-colonial family life, there remains a critical gap in understanding how colonial ideologies continue to influence parenting at both micro (household) and macro (policy and institutional) levels in the contemporary era.

A nuanced analysis of parenting practices across colonial and post-colonial periods is essential for understanding how power, identity, and cultural memory shape the socialization of children. This is particularly relevant amid growing calls to decolonize education, policy, and social institutions in the Global South [10] [11]. By interrogating the legacy and transformation of parenting practices, scholars and practitioners can better understand the entanglement of history, culture, and resistance in shaping childhoods today.

This study is guided by postcolonial theory, which offers a critical lens for examining how colonial ideologies have historically shaped and continue to influence parenting practices in formerly colonized societies such as South Africa. The theory enables scholars to interrogate the imposition of Western norms concerning child discipline, gender roles, and family structures through colonial institutions such as missionary education, religious systems, and legal frameworks, which often marginalized or displaced indigenous African child-rearing traditions [1]. In the post-apartheid era, these colonial legacies persist in South Africa, manifesting through internalized cultural norms and through modern institutions such as schools and child welfare systems that continue to privilege Eurocentric models of parenting [10]. Importantly, postcolonial theory also illuminates sites of resistance and hybridity, where South African families actively revive, adapt, or negotiate traditional parenting practices in response to contemporary pressures such as globalization, urbanization, and socio-economic transformation [12]. Thus, the theory not only exposes the power-laden continuities of colonial influence but also foregrounds the agency of postcolonial subjects in reimagining and reconstructing parenting on culturally grounded terms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Colonial Disruption of Indigenous Parenting Systems

Colonialism was not only a political and economic project but also a profound cultural intervention that reshaped family structures and parenting practices in colonized territories. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, colonizers introduced foreign models of child-rearing rooted in Eurocentric notions of the nuclear family, patriarchal authority, and rigid discipline [2] [3]. These ideals contrasted sharply with the communal, flexible, and relational parenting systems indigenous to many precolonial societies [4].

Colonial institutions such as mission schools, churches, and legal systems served as tools for enforcing these values. Missionary education promoted Christian family norms that emphasized obedience, male authority, and punitive discipline [1]. Children were often removed from extended kin networks and immersed in Western schooling environments that devalued indigenous languages, customs, and modes of care. These changes led to a systematic erosion of cultural child-rearing knowledge and practices, particularly in African societies where collective parenting through extended families was central to social cohesion [6].

2.2. Persistence and Internalization in the Postcolonial Era

Post-independence, many of the parenting ideologies introduced during colonial rule have not simply vanished. Rather, they have been internalized, normalized, and in some cases, institutionalized within

state structures and societal norms [5] [9]. For example, authoritarian discipline remains prevalent in many African households, justified as "traditional" despite its roots in colonial schooling and Christian teachings [8].

Research from South Africa shows how colonial and apartheid-era ideologies continue to shape present-day parenting through educational curricula, child protection frameworks, and even media representations of family life [13]. These legacies are often reinforced by global parenting discourses, such as "good parenting" or "responsible fatherhood," which privilege individualism and nuclear family norms over communal responsibility [14] [15]. Moreover, parenting expectations continue to be gendered in ways that echo colonial constructions of masculinity and femininity. Women are often burdened with caregiving responsibilities, while men are expected to be distant disciplinarians or economic providers roles rooted in both indigenous patriarchies and colonial gender hierarchies [16].

2.3. Hybridity, Resistance, and the Revival of Indigenous Parenting

Despite the enduring influence of colonial frameworks, postcolonial families are not merely passive recipients of imposed ideologies. Many actively reinterpret and blend indigenous and Western parenting models to respond to contemporary challenges such as poverty, migration, and digitalization [12] [17]. This hybridity is particularly evident in urban African contexts, where caregivers may draw on traditional child rearing values such as collective discipline or moral storytelling while also engaging with modern tools like parenting apps or school-based parenting workshops [18].

There is also a growing movement to decolonize parenting knowledge and practice. Scholars, educators, and cultural leaders are increasingly advocating for a return to Afrocentric frameworks of child development, emphasizing values like ubuntu, relationality, and communal responsibility [10] [11]. These efforts challenge the hegemony of Euro-American psychological models of parenting and highlight the contextual richness of African child-rearing philosophies.

In South Africa, for instance, community-based parenting programmes have begun to incorporate indigenous wisdom systems and storytelling traditions, promoting nurturing and non-violent discipline rooted in cultural identity [19]. Such approaches illustrate the potential for culturally grounded practices to support children's development in ways that are both contextually relevant and psychologically sound.

2.4. Contemporary Forces Shaping Parenting in the Global South

The postcolonial parenting landscape is further complicated by broader social forces such as globalization, urbanization, and economic instability. These dynamics produce both challenges and opportunities for caregivers in formerly colonized societies. On one hand, economic precarity and urban dislocation may erode traditional support systems, leading to parenting stress, neglect, or harsh discipline [20]. On the other hand, digital access and transnational networks can expose parents to diverse practices and parenting philosophies, enabling critical reflection and adaptation [9].

Additionally, child-rearing in the postcolonial era is increasingly shaped by policy interventions that are often imported or funded by international organizations. These include parenting curricula, early childhood development programmes, and rights-based legal reforms many of which reflect Northern pedagogical paradigms [8]. While such interventions may bring valuable resources, they can also displace or override local parenting knowledge if not implemented in culturally sensitive ways [10].

The literature reveals that colonial parenting practices have left enduring legacies in formerly colonized societies, particularly through the institutionalization of Western family norms. However, these legacies are neither static nor universally accepted. Instead, postcolonial parenting is characterized by contestation, adaptation, and creative negotiation, shaped by both historical memory and current global pressures. Understanding these continuities and discontinuities is crucial for developing culturally resonant policies and parenting interventions that support children's holistic development in the Global South.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in the transformative paradigm, which emphasizes social justice, empowerment, and the inclusion of marginalized voices [20]. The transformative framework is particularly relevant for post-apartheid South Africa, where parenting practices are shaped by historical inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and evolving cultural norms.

By adopting this paradigm, the study seeks not only to describe the continuities and discontinuities in parenting practices but also to highlight how these are influenced by broader social transformations and

structural inequalities. The paradigm allows for critical reflection on power relations, intergenerational dynamics, and cultural change in parenting.

3.2. Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed to explore the lived experiences, meanings, and perspectives of parents, young adults, and professionals involved in child-rearing and youth development. This approach was suitable because it allows for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena within their natural contexts [21]. Qualitative inquiry facilitated the exploration of parenting as a culturally and historically situated practice, enabling participants to express how post-apartheid changes have influenced their family structures, discipline strategies, and community roles.

3.3. Research Design

The study utilized a case study design, focusing on a selected South African community that reflects both traditional and modern parenting values. The case study design was appropriate for investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined [22]. This design enabled the researcher to examine multiple perspectives on parenting practices, drawing connections between social change, cultural heritage, and family life in post-apartheid South Africa.

(1) Participant Selection

A total of 30 participants were purposively selected to ensure diverse perspectives on parenting and intergenerational relationships. The sample comprised 10 young adults (aged 18–25) who reflected on their upbringing and the parenting styles they experienced, 10 parents (aged 30–60) representing various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to provide insights into current parenting practices, and 10 professionals, including 2 police officers, 2 psychologists, 2 social workers, 2 teachers, and 2 religious leaders, who engage with families and children in different community and institutional contexts. Purposive sampling was employed because participants were selected based on their knowledge, experiences, and roles in relation to parenting and child development [23]. The inclusion of diverse participant groups facilitated triangulation of perspectives and enhanced the credibility and depth of the study's findings.

(2) Data Generation Methods

Data were generated using two qualitative methods: focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Two FGDs were conducted one with parents and another with young adults each comprising 8 to 10 participants and lasting approximately 90 minutes. These discussions explored key themes such as family structure, discipline, communication, moral education, and community involvement in child-rearing, fostering interaction among participants and enabling the emergence of shared and divergent experiences. In addition, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 professionals, including teachers, police officers, psychologists, social workers, and religious leaders, to obtain in-depth insights into parenting trends from institutional and community perspectives. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was guided by open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their views regarding the changing nature of parenting in post-apartheid South Africa. All FGDs and interviews were conducted in English or participants' preferred local languages and were audio-recorded with informed consent, while field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

(3) Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Transcribed data were coded manually and iteratively, with emerging themes refined through constant comparison across participant groups. The analysis focused on identifying continuities (traditional and enduring parenting norms) and discontinuities (emerging, changing, or hybrid practices) in post-apartheid parenting. Patterns were interpreted through the lens of social transformation and cultural-historical context.

(4) Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board Protocol No. [PROTOCOL

NUMBER: H24/01/23] prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured using pseudonyms and secure storage of all data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Sensitivity was exercised when discussing potentially distressing topics such as family conflict, child discipline, or intergenerational tensions. In cases where participants expressed emotional discomfort, referrals to appropriate support services (e.g., counselling) were provided. The researcher also adhered to the principles of respect, beneficence, and justice as outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Parenting Structures – Communal vs. Nuclear Family

From a postcolonial perspective, post-apartheid parenting structures in South Africa reveal how colonial and apartheid legacies continue to shape the tension between communal and nuclear family systems. Colonialism imposed Western ideals of the nuclear family and individualism, displacing indigenous African kinship systems that were rooted in collectivism and Ubuntu [4] [17]. Yet, many parents still uphold the proverb “it takes a village to raise a child”, valuing the involvement of extended kin such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles in child-rearing. This persistence of communal child-rearing practices reflects the enduring decolonial ethos of Ubuntu, which emphasizes relational identity, mutual care, and collective responsibility in social reproduction [24].

Religious and cultural institutions such as churches and schools continue to reinforce these communal values and serve as moral anchors in parenting. However, neoliberal and post-apartheid socio-economic transformations urbanization, labor migration, and the rise of single-parent households have accelerated a shift toward individualized, nuclear family structures [26] [27]. Furthermore, concerns about child safety, declining community trust, and the bureaucratization of child protection have eroded traditional communal supervision and discipline [28]. As one participant observed, “These days community members, extended family members like uncles and aunties can no longer be entrusted with looking after children because of child abuse ... I still believe in the concept it takes a village to raise a child” [P1]. This highlights a postcolonial tension: while Ubuntu-based parenting embodies resistance to colonial individualism, contemporary socio-economic and institutional pressures continue to privilege privatized, nuclear family models—revealing both continuity and transformation in the cultural politics of care in post-apartheid South Africa.

4.2. Discipline and Behaviour Management

Post-apartheid parenting in South Africa reflects both continuity and change in disciplinary practices. Corporal punishment remains common in some communities, particularly in poorer and rural settings, reflecting intergenerational continuities from the apartheid era when strict, physical discipline was widespread [29] [30]. Religious and moral instruction through church and prayer continues to guide children’s behaviour.

The constitutional protection of children’s rights and the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 have encouraged shifts toward positive and democratic discipline that emphasises reasoning, dialogue, and emotional guidance [31] [32] [33]. Many parents perceive these changes as fostering openness yet undermining respect and authority, especially as communal correction by elders has declined. As one participant noted, “Taking out corporal punishment has made our children indisciplined; they no longer respect adults.” This tension between rights-based parenting and traditional authority highlights the complex moral negotiation faced by post-apartheid families [17].

4.3. Child Autonomy and Rights

Post-apartheid South Africa has seen a marked shift toward recognizing children’s autonomy and rights, as reflected in the Constitution and the Children’s Act (No. 38 of 2005). While children are still encouraged to take on age-appropriate responsibilities in line with traditional African communal values, many parents feel that expanded child rights have weakened parental authority and discipline. As one participant noted, “Parents are afraid of violating children’s rights; as a result, children do as they please because there are no longer consequences for bad behaviour” [SW1]. This perception illustrates the challenge of balancing children’s freedom with accountability. Restrictions on communal correction and parental discipline have also reduced community protection, leaving children more exposed to risky behaviours such as substance use and delinquency. Some parents, attempting to compensate for past hardships, now overindulge their children with material rewards, which may inadvertently foster

entitlement and weaken self-discipline. Balancing child rights with parental guidance thus remains a central challenge in post-apartheid parenting.

4.4. Methods and Tools of Parenting

Post-apartheid South Africa reflects both continuity and change in parenting methods and tools. Traditional approaches such as storytelling, folklore, and religious teachings remain vital means through which parents transmit moral, spiritual, and cultural values to children [34]. Some parents still employ productive punishments like assigning chores or responsibilities to instil discipline and life skills, reflecting the enduring influence of Ubuntu and communal child-rearing principles [17]. However, modern influences have significantly transformed parenting practices, with technology, social media, television, and formal education increasingly replacing traditional communal mentorship [35]. While these tools have broadened children's access to knowledge, they have also exposed them to harmful content that contributes to moral decay, identity confusion, and behavioural problems [36]. Consequently, practices such as virginity testing, controlled diets, and strict curfews have declined as parents embrace more rights-based and democratic approaches to child-rearing. As one participant observed, "Our children are now raised by social media, maids, television where they watch things like soaps, violent movies ... they end up bringing bad things from outside" [P1].

4.5. Gender Roles and Social Expectations

Post-apartheid parenting in South Africa reflects both continuity and change in gender roles and social expectations. Traditional gender-specific teachings persist in some cultural and religious households, where girls are still socialized for domesticity and boys for leadership, echoing patriarchal norms [37] [38]. However, democratic values, gender equality advocacy, and media exposure have significantly weakened the enforcement of rigid gender roles, leading parents to promote greater freedom of self-expression and equality among children [25] [39]. Outdated practices such as initiation rites, virginity testing, and gender-based chores have largely declined, as children increasingly interact with diverse cultures and worldviews through education, caregivers, and digital platforms [34]. As one participant noted, "Children are exposed to different cultures through interacting with nannies from different cultures and social media" [FGD, PA], illustrating how global influences and cultural diversity are reshaping traditional notions of gender and parenting in contemporary South Africa.

4.6. Influence of Historical Trauma on Current Parenting

The lingering effects of historical trauma from apartheid continue to shape contemporary parenting practices in South Africa. Many parents who endured harsh disciplinary practices and authoritarian control during apartheid tend to replicate similar methods, such as corporal punishment or excessive protectiveness, as a learned model of authority and care [4] [40]. This continuity reflects the transgenerational transmission of trauma, where parents unconsciously reproduce the control and discipline that defined their own childhoods. However, notable discontinuities have also emerged. Some parents exhibit compensatory parenting behaviours overprotection, overindulgence, and excessive affection as an attempt to provide their children with the love, freedom, and material comfort they themselves were denied [17]. As one participant observed, "Some parents are over loving their children as a compensatory behaviour. Most of them were deprived of the basic needs and love, now they are overdoing it in their children" [SW1].

Moreover, post-apartheid legal reforms emphasizing children's rights and the prohibition of corporal punishment have led to increased parental anxiety and uncertainty about disciplinary boundaries [15] [33]. Many parents fear violating their children's rights, resulting in more permissive or negotiative parenting approaches. This tension between traditional authoritarian values and emerging democratic family norms illustrates how apartheid's psychological and structural violence continues to influence parent-child dynamics in complex and sometimes contradictory ways

4.7. Merits and Challenges of Post-Apartheid Parenting

Post-apartheid parenting in South Africa reflects both progress and complexity as families adjust to new cultural and social realities. Many parents now promote autonomy, open communication, and positive discipline aligned with democratic and rights-based values, replacing the harsh authoritarian methods common under apartheid [41]. Greater access to education, media, and technology has enhanced children's cognitive and social development but also introduced new challenges such as digital distraction and reduced parental authority [42]. Meanwhile, teenage pregnancy and juvenile delinquency persist,

partly reflecting weakened family control and inconsistent parenting [43]. Some children display entitlement, disrespect, and identity confusion, which parents attribute to permissive approaches that blur moral boundaries. Thus, post-apartheid parenting embodies a delicate balance between nurturing freedom and maintaining moral and social discipline amid rapid social transformation.

4.8. Recommendations for a South African Parenting Theory

Participants emphasized the need for a uniquely South African parenting framework that harmonizes traditional communal values with contemporary understandings of child development and rights. They highlighted the enduring importance of Ubuntu a philosophy emphasizing interconnectedness, respect, and collective responsibility as a moral compass for raising children in post-apartheid society. This approach encourages the reintegration of extended family and community participation in nurturing children, countering the growing individualism observed in urban settings [4] [44]. At the same time, participants advocated for parenting styles that balance warmth, structure, and respect, particularly authoritative and democratic approaches known to foster psychosocial competence and moral reasoning [45]. The call for parental education, mentorship, and intersectoral collaboration was also clear participants viewed schools, churches, and social workers as key agents in reinforcing parenting values and providing guidance to caregivers navigating socioeconomic pressures. Furthermore, reviving cultural and moral teachings in both schools and communities was seen as essential to grounding children in ethical and respectful behaviour while still upholding the principles of children's rights enshrined in the South African Constitution [46]. As one participant stated, "Parenting should be intentional, spell out the values that you want from your children ... institutions like schools and churches must play a pivotal role" [PSY1].

5. Conclusion

Parenting practices in post-apartheid South Africa reveal a complex interplay of continuity and change shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-political transformations. While some traditional elements such as communal child-rearing, moral instruction, and religious guidance persist, many aspects have evolved in response to urbanization, children's rights legislation, and exposure to global media. Parents now navigate between preserving cultural values and adapting to modern ideals of autonomy, equality, and democratic communication. However, this transition has also created tensions, including diminished community involvement, weakened discipline, and the erosion of collective moral norms. Overall, post-apartheid parenting reflects both resilience and adaptation, as families strive to balance the preservation of Ubuntu-based values with the demands of a rights-based society.

To strengthen parenting practices in contemporary South Africa, a hybrid approach that integrates traditional communal principles with modern developmental and rights-based frameworks is essential. Policymakers, educators, and social workers should collaborate to promote parental education programs that emphasize positive discipline, emotional intelligence, and cultural continuity. Schools and faith-based institutions can play a crucial role in reinforcing moral and social values, while community structures should be revitalized to restore collective responsibility in child-rearing. Furthermore, parenting interventions should address the lingering psychological effects of apartheid-era trauma by promoting supportive, reflective, and intentional parenting. Ultimately, a uniquely South African parenting model grounded in Ubuntu and responsive to contemporary realities should guide families toward nurturing responsible, empathetic, and socially grounded children.

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