

Social Network Interviewing: Maximizing Opportunities for Transformation

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Men and masculinities have in the past fifteen years become an increasing focus of researchers, funders and development practitioners. Often controversial, the amount of resources expended on work with men and boys results from two main perceptions with regard to gender and human development. First, that attention to the experiences of women and girls in development has seen significant success in terms of poverty alleviation, health and economic growth. Second, that issues such as unemployment, gender-based violence, crime and alcohol dependency would improve if similar attention were paid to the challenges of men's lives. Research and intervention efforts based on these perceptions tend to address men or groups of men as individuals without taking account of their day-to-day lives and those who share it with them – in other words, their social networks.

In the book *Teenage Tata: Voices of Young Fathers in South Africa* (by HSRC researchers Sharlene Swartz and Arvin Bhana), the authors innovated and employed Social Network Interviewing as a means of studying young fathers within their communities. Research participants carried out interviews with members of their social networks, including parents, extended family, family of the mother of the children, teachers, friends and religious leaders, based on questions collaboratively developed. Questions the young fathers asked in these interviews included, "What kind of father do you think I have been since my baby was born?" and "What advice do you have for me about being a young father?" As well as providing rich qualitative data about the lives of young fathers – a frequently invisible group - interviews presented an opportunity for these young fathers to engage with people who share their lives about their feelings and thoughts related to fatherhood. Social Network Interviewing also provided an opportunity for discussions of the effects of culture, poverty and opportunity on behaviour and created space for the young men to engage in self-evaluation in relation to those impacted by their choices and actions.

Further, Social Network Interviewing allowed for corrective messages to be relayed in a manner to which young men were more likely to be receptive than standard educational sessions, workshops and media messages. For example, one friend interviewed by a young father candidly said:

As your closest friend, uh, because I've been spending a lot of time with you – [I can see that] you don't take care of your baby. You're very – Sometimes you become irresponsible – you're [with your new girlfriend] instead of doing what you must do to keep contact with your baby.

The positive response from the participants in *Teenage Tata* highlights the transformational potential of Social Network Interviewing in addressing stereotypes, encouraging behavioural change and supporting gender equality.

The support of social connections is an important and recurring issue in African gender scholarship. Researchers stress the importance of collectivity within family, peer groups and the wider community in describing gender values, roles and behaviours in African societies. In the context of South Africa, the legacies of decades of racial subjugation, intentional impoverishment and forced migration experienced by the majority of the population have significantly damaged the collective social structures that form the foundations of communities. As a result, post-apartheid South Africa contends with a complex social and economic situation marked by widespread poverty and welfare dependency, nearly fifty percent unemployment (broadly defined) and poor quality education.

The deterioration of family and social structures as well as the lack of access to traditional masculine roles, such as providing for one's family, have further contributed to the rise of destructive behaviour among men such as alcohol and substance abuse, crime and violence, sexual assault, child abuse and absentee fathers. However, despite these obstacles, researchers and development practitioners have reported positive outcomes from working with men. Further, men have demonstrated their willingness to support gender equality based on their participation in projects and programmes. As a case in point, the *Teenage Tata* participants were thankful for the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences for the first time and were sad the project had to end. Beyond programmes to build skills, provide employment and support victims of crime and abuse, the key to fostering positive change among men in the South African context of poverty and historical disadvantage is to mobilise and support existing social networks.

Social Network Interviews help to explain behaviour by focussing attention on the relationships between individuals

and society. Rather than exclusively studying the particular context of an individual, such as demographic and socioeconomic traits, social network analysis highlights individuals' ties to those around them such as religious organizations, educational institutions, recreational activities, family and peer groups. For example, in one social network interview, a grandfather commented to his young father grandson:

The culture forced us to stand for you at the beginning when the family had to tell you that you make their child [pregnant]. So they could not talk with you because of your age. That's how the culture made you a good father. But it also made you a bad father because of excluding you in many things.

This community elder speaks of how social networks shape behaviour while the previous example of admonishment by a friend shows how social networks support positive changes in behaviour.

Too often, research and support programmes interact with men either as individuals with personal challenges, restraints and opportunities or as groups of men with shared obstacles and experiences. Through interventions such as educational programmes and workshops, focus groups and counselling, productive gains may be made at the level of individual men's lives but a gap persists between these improvements and wider social change and benefits to the communities in which men live. Social Network Interviewing spreads the benefits men accrue from their interaction with these activities to the larger community. The function of Social Network Interviewing is well illustrated by one participant who said that the experience gave his community a chance to express their criticisms of his behaviour and allowed him to "hear some of the other things [members of his community] have to say. Like also there's a chance for them to say what they could have done, and they never did do to help." Community involvement is a priority of both research and intervention projects but is notoriously difficult to achieve. Social Network Interviewing represents an opportunity to make meaningful advances toward positive change at the community and wider societal level.

Although this article deals with Social Network Interviewing as a method of research and intervention to support positive change in disadvantaged men's lives and conceptions of masculinities, it is a framework that can be extended to work with other marginalized groups around issues such as unemployment, youth and HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. Support of social networks enhances the ability of communities as cooperative entities to develop resilience in the context of poverty, gender inequality and xenophobia. It a useful tool to add to existing research and interventions methods to enhance the transformational possibilities of work with marginalized, hard to reach and disadvantaged groups. In the difficult and disjointed social context of South Africa, rebuilding communities around positive action is essential to producing meaningful and lasting social change.

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