Chapter 9

Relationship Literacy: Wider Lessons from Young Single Mothers in Nairobi Slums

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will explore the attitudes of young women between the ages of 18-25 years towards romantic relationships in the slums of Nairobi, with a view to wider lessons for young women in other societies. Through four case studies examining the lives, relationships and motherhood experiences in Mukuru Kwa Ruben slum, key themes are suggested to explain the high rate of early and single motherhood. Through the construct of ‘relationship literacy,’ the chapter will suggest that poor or non-existent male role models, weak or negative experiences of committed relationships, combined with harsh socio-economic consequences have resulted in young women having a little notion of what a real relationship is or what commitment is about. In the conclusion, it is suggested that to achieve improved relationships and life chances for young women both in the slums and well beyond, it is vital to focus on promoting and enhancing the relationship literacy of girls and young women, to enable them to make effective life choices.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore the attitudes of young women between 18-25 years towards romantic relationships in the slums of Nairobi, with a view to wider lessons for young women in other societies. Through four case studies examining the lives, relationships and motherhood experiences in the Mukuru Kwa Ruben slum, key themes are suggested to explain the high rate of early and single motherhood. The chapter introduces the construct of “relationship literacy,” that poor or non-existent male role models, weak or negative experiences of committed relationships, combined with harsh socio-economic consequences have resulted in young women having little notion of what a real relationship is or what commitment
entails. In conclusion, it is suggested that to achieve improved relationships and life chances for young women, both in the slums and well beyond, it is vital to focus on promoting and enhancing the relationship literacy of girls and young women to enable them to make effective life choices.

**METHODOLOGY**

The conclusions set out in this chapter are set within a case study methodology that does not aim to draw a statistical sample from the population (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003). Whilst confining the research to a small population limits its statistical power, it facilitates a more in-depth investigation. We use case study as a methodology rather than a research paradigm (Gomm et al., 2001), and it may therefore be combined with other research methods.

This study adopted the more traditional approach to case study modelled on the professions (see Bromley, 1986; Robson, 2003). Thus, the main features of a case study methodology are that it: a) involves fewer individuals as objects of investigation, b) generates a greater volume of material per individual, c) is keenly interested in the lived experience of those being researched, and d) studies naturally occurring phenomena uncontrolled by the researcher. By contrast, this study does not adopt the radical, purist view of the case study approach which demands that data is left unstructured, so as not to impose the researchers’ intellectual stamp and that it capture a unique situation without attempting to achieve generalizability.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that case study can be used to generate what Cronbach (1975, p. 125) referred to as “working hypotheses” or “general conclusions” (Schofield in Gomm et al., 2002 p. 38), but not law-like generalisations. To enable transferability to other contexts, the researcher must provide what Geertz (1973) termed a ‘thick description’ of the first context for comparison purposes, even whilst accepting that each situation is unique (Donmoyer, 2002). Following Robson (2002 p. 177), we view case studies as facilitating “the development of a theory, which helps in understanding other cases or situations.” Hence, (Sim, 1998 p. 350) “Data gained from a particular study provide theoretical insights which possess sufficient generalisability or universality to allow their projections to other contexts or situations.” We follow a case study approach that seeks to establish causal links, even if it does not make claims of direct correlation and one that recognises the need for theory development and thus generalizability (Yin, 1994; Mitchel in Gomm et al., 2002).

Candidate selection – candidate selection was opportunistic (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2003), based on people the first author was introduced to through friends who volunteered with local charities or she encountered as a volunteer script writer for a media company. Three of the four women featured in the case studies were very challenging to interview and required several attempts, as they were distrusting and traumatised. In addition, interviews were conducted with various experts, including the area chief of the Mukuru Kwa Reuben slum, a discipline master from a high school within Mukuru Slums, a lecturer at Catholic University of Eastern Africa and a Marriage counsellor, Psychologist and lecturer at Tangaza College. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes with the women, while the interviews with the experts lasted around an hour.
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