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What Does It Mean to Respect One’s Mother? A Narrative Approach Exploring Maternal Respect Through the Perspectives of Zulu Mothers And Their Children

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SIT Study Abroad

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**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RESPECT ONE’S MOTHER? A NARRATIVE APPROACH**

**EXPLORING MATERNAL RESPECT THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVES OF ZULU MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN**

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This paper attempts to synthesize both background research and interview content on respect, specifically respect for mothers from their children in Cato Manor. Cato Manor is populated with largely single-mother, matriarchal households of Zulu identifying people.

I conducted eight interviews with four mothers and their children, with the “children” ranging in age from 19 to 29. I requested that my participants share as many stories with me as possible in order to help me write my findings in a narrative approach. I asked about a variety of topics, including what respect is in general, what it means to respect one’s mother, and how respect differs when it comes to fathers.

Zulu culture and black culture were factors in many of the responses I received. Cultural expectations shaped respect in general: who was respected and how to show it. Lessons learned from one’s mother and one’s community were essential aspects in one’s personal perception of respect and how to show respect towards one’s mother. Children spoke about respecting their mother as being obedient and behaving well outside the home, as they are a reflection of how their mother raised them. Similarly, mothers stated their expectations of good behavior from their children outside the home, often mentioning respect towards elders.
On paper, respect for mothers in Cato Manor does not differ much from respect for elders in the community. It is in the intricacies of my participants’ answers where the fascinating substance lies: the different examples of disrespect, the conflicting opinions, the common themes, and how the features of Cato Manor influence it all.

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Note: In my ISP, I interviewed mothers and their “children.” These “children” are adults aged 19, 21, 26, and 29. Throughout my ISP, I use the word “children” to describe the 4 adults whose mothers I also spoke to. They are not children, but it is a way for me to echo the fact that these participants were raised by the other participants I spoke with. I also use the word “youth” to describe the four “child” participants. Words such as offspring seemed inorganic.

Introduction

I still remember the first time I told my mother I hated her. The air was warm and my best friend was at my doorstep, waiting for me to play with her. I do not remember why my mother told me I had to stay home. Looking back, I’m sure she had a logical, just reason. Six-year-old me did not see it that way. I remember how awful it made me feel to say it, and more awful still to see how sad and how shocked my mother was. My
beautiful, hardworking, generous, thoughtful mother. Since that day so long ago, I have made many more bratty, rude, arrogant comments to my mother; disrespected her.

No mother is perfect, mine included. But I am steadfast in my belief that she is a great mother. I respect her for so many reasons, but does that mean I always show respect towards her? Obviously not. So what does it mean when I say I respect her? What does it mean when somebody in Cato Manor says they respect their mother? More specifically, what is the nature of the respect a child has for his or her mother in Cato Manor? The complex nature of respecting one’s mother is something I am decidedly interested in. Given the interesting family dynamics that exist in Cato Manor (largely single-mother, matriarchal households), I believe my study can help provide a greater understanding of behaviour in the context of family and community dynamics in Cato.

In my study I explored the relationship between mother and child: what respect means to different mother and child pairs that each have their own complex, unique relationship. Through my interviews, I learned about where and how respect is taught and learned in Cato Manor, and how the perceptions of that respect align and differ from the perspective of mother and child.

Is respect demanded or freely given? Is the respect a person has for and shows towards his or her mother inherently different than the respect that person has and shows towards others? My ISP (Independent Study Project) helped answer these questions, or at least contributed to a better understanding of these questions in the context of Cato Manor.

This study is important given the lack of information on the subject. While respect towards fathers in Zulu communities has been studied, articles/information/studies on respect towards mothers is rare and difficult to find. This ISP has begun to fill in that gap, albeit with a limited scope.
If I were asked to describe the way children act towards their parents in Cato Manor, mothers specifically, I would say they act respectfully. The sass, backtalk, and rage-fuelled “No! I don’t WANT to!” reactions to discipline that I saw so often in the United States seem to be much less common here. Of course, I heard exasperated tones when mama nagged my homestay sisters to do this or that, but they always obliged. What does literature say about respect towards mothers in Zulu culture, or in South Africa? The answer: not much.

When one types “inhlonipho” fathers” into Google Scholar, an array of articles discussing the relationship between father and child appear. However, when one types in “inhlonipho mothers”, loosely related articles about mothers-in-law, gender inequality, and even Zulu fathers appear. I also searched “mother child relationship South Africa”, “respect for mothers in South Africa”, “respect for mothers Zulu culture”, among many other phrases, and yet these searches yielded no results directly relevant to my research question. There is a gaping hole when it comes to the study of mother-child relationships in Zulu culture. A child’s respect for his or her mother cannot be understood by looking at the respect a child has for his or her father. My ISP sheds some light on the subject, keeping in mind the limitations of my study do not allow for generalization across all Zulu mothers and children.

In Stephanie Rudwick’s investigation of familial respect in African societies through a linguistic lens (2008), she makes the statement “Most traditional African societies, due to strict patriarchy and seniority principles inherent in their cultural systems, prescribe great significance to respectful behaviour towards males and elders.” (p. 152). In my 20 years on this planet, I have observed that mothers ARE respected figures in nearly every space. So, since this quote says “males” and “elders,” the assumption must be made that mothers are lumped in with “elders” (if they are included at all), since their gender does

1 “Inhlonipho” translates to respect in isiZulu (isiZulu.net, 2018).
not grant them automatic societal respect (as patriarchy does for males). I believe, however, that the categorization should not be that simple. Mothers deserve and receive respect. This respect should be better understood.

A concept that must be considered when looking at respect in African communities is “ubuntu.” According to Mokgoro (1998), “Group solidarity, conformity, respect, human dignity, humanistic orientation, and collective unity have, among others been defined as key social values of *ubuntu*” (p. 3). While gender, age, and relationship with a person all play a role in respect, the concept of ubuntu ranges much farther and wider than that, being described as “a world-view of African societies and a determining factor in the formation of perceptions which influence social conduct.” (Mokgoro 1998 p. 2). Ubuntu influences respect by being a guiding force behind the way those in African societies think, behave, treat other people, and treat themselves. But the question remains: how do African societies view respect for mothers?

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2 “Ubuntu” directly translates to humaneness or humanity (isiZulu.net, 2018).
“Methodologies”/ Unable to Exhale

Since before I left the United States for South Africa, I knew I wanted to do an ISP, and I knew I wanted to conduct interviews. I was not thinking about how reliable or applicable my "data" would be. I was aching to learn about real human experience in a place entirely different from anywhere I had ever been. I bragged about the ISP portion of the program to those who asked me about what I would be doing while abroad. What I did not anticipate, however, was the anxiety the ISP would create; the insecurities I felt in myself and about my project. While at times this anxiety was crippling, I know that I made the right decisions throughout this process. I stuck with my gut instinct, staying in Durban and interviewing members of the incredible community I lived in for five weeks, Cato Manor.

I reached out to the generous, long-time Cato resident Lungelo Makhathini for help in picking participants, knowing he would keep all of their identities private. He quickly named four mother-child pairs that would be a good fit for my project. I got the phone numbers of three of the “children” and one of the mothers I would be interviewing in
Cato. I messaged them on WhatsApp, asking if they were willing to be interviewed for
my ISP. When they agreed, I asked for a time when I could interview both the mother
and child, though the interviews had to be separate and private from each other. I
decided I would keep my participants anonymous, referring to them with fake names
throughout my paper. Two of my interviews were set to happen in three days. The ball
was rolling quickly.

The First

I sat on the plastic-covered couch, waiting for my first participant, Mama Nandi,
to join me. My hands were sweating. Scratch that. My whole body was sweating. I
enjoy talking to people. I am good at talking to people. I know Mama Nandi, I love
her and she loves me. Why was I so nervous?

30/10/2018 11:45 PM
My first interview is scheduled for tomorrow. Now that it’s real, I can’t help but
feel that something’s off. I don’t have enough questions, I have too many. I’m not
using the right words; asking the right questions. Did I make a typo on the
informed consent?
I take a step back. Inhale.
I’m not in control of what happens in the interviews. I have no idea what to
expect. I need to be okay with that.
I like calculus because I got an A. I worked hard so that it made sense, so that I
knew how to do the problems. I can’t do that here. I will ask what I ask, they will
answer how they answer. I will ultimately write about it, I hope in the shape of a
narrative. Will it be good enough? Will it do justice to my topic, my participants,
my abilities? My chest is tight.
I will learn. (Robertson, Personal Journal Entry, 2018).

So that was why. I am a control freak. (And for the record, I did make a typo on the informed consent).

Mama Nandi loved the snacks I brought her (and I swear I could write a book about the stress and anxiety of that grocery store trip after getting the answer “everything!” when I inquired about what food Mama Nandi likes), and was smiling when she sat down across from me on her couch. We hugged and we small talked. I read her the consent form and she asked me where to sign. I turned down the TV and turned on my recorder. I asked my eleven questions and she answered them fully, sharing personal stories along the way. She even asked me a couple of questions at the end. I interviewed her son directly after, whom I would consider a friend. That interview functioned more as a casual, honest conversation. He even gave me an idea for another question I should ask that ended up generating some of the most interesting responses of my interviews. By all means and standards, my first two interviews that day went well. But still, I found myself unable to exhale.

More

I completed six more interviews after Mama Nandi and her son. Eight total. Some interviews went better than others, with the recordings ranging from 10 minutes to 26 minutes. I asked each mother the same set of eleven questions and each child the same set of eleven questions, with some differences between the questions I asked the mothers and the children. I completed all of my interviews between October 31st and November 10th. On my second round of interviews I began to see themes emerging in my participants’ responses, which provided (minimal) relief. I was able to exhale a small fraction of my stuck breath. These themes were the first tangible evidence of my ISP truly coming together. It is also important to note that, considering the limited number
of participants, my study cannot accurately represent the whole population of Cato Manor.

At the end of my final interview, I could not wait to transcribe what I had just heard and move onto “coding” my interviews. In my case, coding meant creating one document for the mother interviews and one document for the child interviews and recording recurring themes and important quotes. It was from there that I began to think of short stories to write to reflect these themes. The exhale continued, but I still did not feel any sort of ease.

The short stories such as “What Money Can’t Buy” were written to encapsulate the main motifs that kept appearing throughout my interviews, especially motifs that seemed to have bigger social implications. For example, “What Money Can’t Buy” incorporates numerous different ideas from my interviews: that respect is earned; how to treat people; how important greeting people is in Zulu communities; and that one must give respect to gain respect. Respect cannot be measured or understood in a vacuum. One’s surroundings and one’s culture play a huge role in shaping respect: expectations, implications, and portrayal.

I decided that I wanted to take a narrative approach early on. I have always liked writing in a non-traditional manner, especially writing stories. I often find myself lost in thought, creating fantastical narratives which almost always have roots in something that is on my mind, something I cannot stop thinking about. I also knew that my own journey with the ISP was going to be present throughout, whether it be diary entries or simply talking about my experiences with certain parts of the process, which is allowed for in narratives. The “narrative approach” does not restrict itself to one story. Personal narrative can “refer to diaries, journals, and letters as well as to autobiographical stories (Chase 2005, p. 652). Stories that reflect my interviews as well as my personal process with the ISP contributed to a better understanding of what I set out to do, what I did, and what it all means.
A quote in Chase’s “Narrative Inquiry” (2005, 653) that really stood out to me comes from Thomas and Znaniecki (1918/1927) stating,

A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organization, but analyse the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence which it has upon their lives. (p. 1833).

When I first read this quote, I finally felt assurance that I would not be the only person to see the value and significance of my ISP. Respect is many things, and “social institution” is a great way to conceptualize that. Additionally, because I restricted my study to “respect for mothers in Cato Manor,” the narrow focus allowed for a deeper, more acute understanding. Through my interviews, I saw the “personal experience of various members” as well as “the influence which it has upon their lives.”.

Additionally, “narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time.” (Bruner, 1986 in Chase, 2005, p. 652). This quote embodies the process of turning my interview material into stories, into a “meaningful whole” (or wholes). Including my own personal process helped to “refine the understanding of the role of the researcher...refine the understanding of the responses of the participants in the study...and [function as an] interactive tool of communication between the researcher and participants in the study” (Janesick 1999, p. 506), which added clarity to both my personal narrative and the narratives I created through the interviews.
Ethics

In eighth grade I had a close friend named Lily. Lily and I hung out frequently and often talked about our personal lives. We shared secrets and experiences we had never told anyone else. We talked about our ex-boyfriends and our crushes. In one of the most honest and confusing conversations I have ever had, we nearly-simultaneously admitted that we thought we had crushes on each other. It was a terrifying, exciting exchange. I had never considered the fact that I might develop feelings for a girl. Lily and I had an especially private relationship. We were both in completely new territory, learning as we went.

In Virginia, it is a requirement that students take health classes in middle and high school. Every single year I took health there would be a question box for anonymous questions that would be answered at the end of the class period. Needless to say, I was confused about my sexuality. People that liked both boys and girls was not something I had seen before. I thought the question box was a reasonable place to look for some answers. The questions would be answered by the health teacher, whom I adored. I trusted that my health teacher would not show the piece of paper to anyone, or leave it sitting around, but nonetheless:
I waited to write my question until I saw at least 5 other students writing questions of their own.

I made sure no one saw the color pen I was using.

I wrote with my left hand, so nobody would be able to recognize my handwriting.

I walked out of the classroom that day with my friends, hiding my slip of paper in my hand.

I said that I left something in the classroom, and to go on without me.

I made sure all of my classmates had left the room.

I quickly walked into the classroom, put the question in the question box, and walked out, avoiding eye-contact with the teacher the whole time.

The next day, when the teacher read, “Is it okay to be bisexual?” aloud, and discussed sexuality, I pretended not to pay much attention.

(But without a doubt, I was beet red).

I went to so much trouble that day, and although it seems silly reflecting on it now, I remember it all feeling entirely necessary. I put my trust in the teacher, hoping that he would not share what I had written, considering he may have had a good idea that I was the one who wrote it.

Safety. That is what it came down to for me that day. Feeling safe and protected. When I read over my ISP questions (before doing any interviews), I did not think my questions would create any danger or discomfort. But to me, that is not what mattered. I wanted my participants to feel safe. I needed them to know that I would change their names, not share what they said with me to anyone else, delete the recordings as soon as I finished the transcripts, and delete the transcripts as soon as I was done with my ISP. I needed them to know that it was more than okay if they wanted to skip a question or if they decided that they did not want their interview to be included in my ISP. I wanted them to feel as if they could be vulnerable and honest with me. I explained all of this to them as I read them my consent forms. I made sure they were comfortable with me
recording the interviews and had them sign separately demonstrating that. If I had sensed any hesitation or distress from any of my participants, I would not have proceeded. I kept all the recordings and transcripts on password protected devices that only I used.

Another thought that floated within me prior to, during, and after the ISP process was my responsibility in reflecting my interviewee’s responses and realities in an honest and fair way. Although their identities are anonymous, my interviewees deserve to be portrayed fully and accurately. I actively considered this when interviewing and writing. I hope I did them justice.

Something else to consider in this ISP is my own positionality; in particular, my privilege. The people I interviewed knew that I was a student from America. My mere presence in this country suggested a certain level of privilege, as well as being a part of this program and doing the ISP. I have to recognize the limitations my positionality may create in how much my participants feel that they can relate to me and speak honestly to me.

Findings

What Money Can’t Buy

A boy wakes up one morning, exhausted. He checks his phone, hoping his best friend has responded to his request to hang out today.

“Got other plans. Piss off.”
He sighs. He does not know why people treat him this way. The boy pulls on some clothes and lumbers into the living room. His mother is making breakfast. “Going to the store,” he mutters, leaving before he hears her reply.

He drifts along the busy streets with his head down. Neighbors call out to him, “Sawubona bhuti³!” The boy keeps walking.

He arrives at the SuperSpar. He wanders the aisles until he finds it. “Respect,” it reads. On the hooks hang small placards. He picks one up and flips it over to see how much he can buy with the money shoved in his pocket.

NOT AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE.

Respect is Earned.

See also:

Tango Classes: 75R. It takes two.

Of my four youth participants, every single one referred to respect as either a “two-way street” or something that was earned. This requisite of respect seemed to carry particular significance for them. Respect is not freely given. It is not taken lightly. “You have to respect another person in order to gain respect from that person,” 21-year-old Andile described to me (Andile, 2018). To one participant whom I will call Gabisile, the implications of respect went even further: “A rapper HHP died of depression, he killed himself.” (Gabisile 2018). She made this comment after speaking about how disrespect can often lead to disagreements and anger. To say respect is important in personal relationships is an understatement.

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³ Sawubona is a greeting in isiZulu, meaning hello. It directly translates to “I see you.” (isiZulu.net, 2018). Bhuti is isiZulu for “brother” (isiZulu.net, 2018)
Two out of four mothers also described respect as a two-way street when asked for their personal definition of the word. Mama Nandi, a 50-year-old participant said,

When it comes to respect, it’s a two-way thing. You must respect if you want to be respected. Especially we older people, we parents, you can’t just say that your child doesn’t respect you if you don’t behave yourself. As the mother you have to show respect first...That’s how respect is. It takes two to tango. (Mama Nandi, 2018).

Although mothers are in a “superior” position to their children, not a single mother mentioned expecting respect solely because they are the child’s mother, or that they expect a certain kind of respect from their children. On the respect she receives as a mother from her son, Mama Lethabo told me,

He respects me, and I teach him, you mustn’t respect me as your mother. You must respect even others, outsiders. The old lady outside, you must see that people are like me, no matter it’s not your real mother, but you must give them that respect. (Mama Lethabo, 2018).

(This quote from Mama Lethabo was particularly thought-provoking. It seems to suggest that respect does not have to be earned, but should be given by youth/children to every elder. I discuss this later).

Mothers in Cato Manor, commonly and lovingly referred to as “Mamas”, are highly regarded. When Mamas call out to children as they are running through the hills of Cato, the children listen, no matter whose mother it really is. Despite this, I was surprised to hear that mothers do not expect to be treated differently by their own children. I started to think about how I would have answered these questions if I were in
the place of the participants. When I asked myself the question “is the respect I give to my mother different than the respect I give to a friend’s mom?”, the answer I immediately went to was ‘yes’. But when I asked myself why, I could not seem to think of a clear answer. Is it because she raised me, because she has done so much for me that I cannot think of respecting her in the same way as respecting someone who played no part in raising me? Maybe. However, when I considered how I actually act towards my mother and towards my friend’s parents, I without a doubt act more “respectfully” towards people who are not my mother. I would never take the tone with my best friend’s mom that I do with my own. The further into my own head I went, pondering respect, the implications of respect, and how respect presents itself, the more confused I got. I could not provide a logical and holistic explanation, as I usually can after I get worked up about something. I then started to consider other aspects of my relationship with my mom: the amount of time I spend with her, the things we do together, the conversations we have about the silliest and most serious things, the ways in which we show our love. Tone of voice alone does not dictate your relationship with someone or the respect you have for them. Phew.

Here, I revisit Mama Lethabo’s quote where she described how she teaches her son to respect everybody the way he respects her (Mama Lethabo, 2018). This expectation from Mama Lethabo seems to undercut the notion that respect must be earned. I thought about this contradiction for a while and looked again through the transcriptions from my interviews with the four mothers. Every one of them mentioned the expectation of their children to respect people outside their home. At some point down the road of worrying about the implications of this inconsistency, I decided that this did not disrupt my findings. Mothers can expect their children to act respectfully towards elders and neighbors while genuinely having the opinion that respect is a two-way street. “Children” can recognize that it is a cultural custom to respect elders without
them having “earned it”. Definitions of respect can be flexible and have exceptions. Opinions that don’t necessarily align do not have to exist in dissonance.

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**The Perfect Man**

A woman met a man. Not just any man; the perfect man. He was kind, generous, smart, honest, attractive, and mature. They had an instant connection. They went out on dates, watched TV shows together, went on long walks, and cooked for each other. They were in love. They had discussed marriage, but they were on the same page of wanting to wait. They were young and in no rush.

The woman could not believe how well this relationship was going. It was so much different than her other relationships; so much easier. The way they talked and spent hours on end together. She had had great relationships in the past, but none like this. What was making this relationship so much better than the others?

Well, he had a quirk. A quirk she had never seen before, something she never would have believed existed.

He was invisible to her mother.

She had a routine at this point for sneaking around with her boyfriends. She always made sure to know her mother’s work schedule at the beginning of the week, and she had taken a bar off her window so her partners could escape if her mother ever came home unexpectedly. It was tedious, but necessary. Her mother was a sangoma, so her hours were not always rigid. With this man, though, she didn’t have to hide him.

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4 Sangoma translates to “diviner”. Sangomas communicate with ancestors and treat many different ailments.
They had been sitting on the couch in the living room one day watching a movie. They had both fallen asleep. In walks Mama, and both the woman and her boyfriend were terrified. Mama talked to her daughter as if everything was normal, as if there were not a man on the couch next to her. The mother asked why the daughter looked so worried.

“I had a nightmare...” she whispered back.

There was no way Mama could see him. Mama had gotten so angry when, during her daughter’s last relationship, she saw a picture of her daughter holding hands with her boyfriend on WhatsApp. Dating was something that was not spoken about. If her mother saw anything having to do with her daughter in a relationship, she was NOT happy.

A smile crept across the woman’s face. She had never felt so free, so happy. It was better this way. Better for her mother, better for her.

They dated for a long time, and despite this man’s invisibility (which only happened with her Mama), they tried to spend as little time at the woman’s house as possible. Neither of them fully understood what was going on.

Finally, two years later, the couple decided they were ready for marriage. The woman started to get worried. She did not know how the marriage would work if her mother could not see him. She decided to talk to her mother about it. Hand in hand, the couple walked into her house.

The mother looked up and smiled. “Ah, you are finally ready.”

The couple glanced at each other, unnerved.

“A friend of mine told me when you met this man. She saw you together at a bar, not once, but twice. She spoke of how happy you looked. I gathered some herbs
and bones and made umuthi\textsuperscript{5} that would assure I would never see you two together until you were ready for marriage. I had my friend bribe the bartender to put it in your drinks the next time you came in. Don’t say I never did anything for you. Welcome to the family.”

Two out of four of my youth participants heavily emphasized that hiding relationships from their mothers was a form of respect. The word hiding, however, does not necessarily mean the mother does not know about the relationship in these situations. On hiding her relationships, Gabisile told me,

“I cannot say “oh yeah, I’m sleeping over at my boyfriend’s place”. I cannot tell her that. Even if I am, I’ll probably lie and be like, “I’m going to my friend’s house, cause we work together, she stays in town, blah blah blah.” I cannot just blatantly say “Oh I’m going to my boyfriend’s place, I’m going to go SHAG”. So, it’s more respectful to just keep it on the downlow (Gabisile, 2018).

Although the mothers may know about the relationship, it is taboo for the mothers and children to talk about it. Another one of my youth participants, Thandeka, when responding to the question of how close she is with her mother, said “most people would consider ‘closeness’ for example when you speak about things like your partner or what not. So, for us the relationship does not extend there, but in terms of everything else, we are [close]” (Thandeka, 2018). In a later question, Thandeka elaborated, saying “For example whenever my mom comes around my boyfriend would leave because for

\textsuperscript{5} Umuthi translates to “tree” and “medicine”, but in this context means “medicine” (isiZulu.net, 2018).
him that’s disrespectful, for him to be around. It’s quite interesting this whole respect and disrespect thing.” (Thandeka, 2018).

I found this aspect of respect incredibly fascinating. The reason for this, as explained in the same way by both Gabisile and Thandeka, was “black culture” (Gabisile, 2018; Thandeka, 2018). Gabisile told me that “in black tradition, the mother or your parents are only introduced when you’re getting married” (Gabisile, 2018). Thandeka explained why she does not talk about her partner with her mother, saying “Because there’s basically a way in which all those things must be done. There’s a process.” (Thandeka, 2018). At first, I thought that this meant they were respecting the way in which things are meant to be done in black/Zulu culture as opposed to respecting their mothers, as they claimed. I realized, however, that the two are not mutually exclusive. They go hand in hand. Trying to draw one line from what you respect and why you respect it is not representative of all the moving parts that function within respect, such as the different social dynamics, relationships, and cultural expectations.

Relationships were not the only context in which the phrases “black culture”, “Zulu culture”, and “tradition” were mentioned. 75% of my participants used at least one of these phrases in his or her responses. Nkosi talked about children representing their family in the way they behave outside the household as being culturally guided (Nkosi, 2018). One participant, Mama Lesedi, mentioned the treatment of elders as having cultural significance, saying “in our culture, we don’t just talk anyhow to the elders” (Mama Lesedi, 2018). Mama Lesedi also shared a Zulu idiom with me, saying,

You know in our culture we say, ‘if you point fingers at other people, you must be aware that you are only using one finger to point at them, and the three fingers are pointing at you.’ Which means that, I would say it summarizes that you must respect other people in order to gain respect. (Mama Lesedi, 2018).
This idiom really stuck with me. While it applies to respect, it is not limited to respect. I would almost consider it a paradigm: everything one says and does has implications for those around them as well as themselves.

When thinking about the “cultural expectations” revealed in my interviews, as well as my observations of how much more respectful children in Cato Manor are than in the United States, I wondered about different cultural groups within the United States. An article I found examined respect for parental-authority in African American, Latina, and European American girls (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gun, 2008). African American and Latina girls showed significantly more respect for parental figures than European American girls (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gun, 2008). Dixon, Graber, and Brooks-Gun (2008) also found that African American and Latina mothers reported more intense arguments when they felt as if they were not being respected than European American mothers (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gun, 2008). The findings of that study reminded me of responses I got from multiple of my youth participants when they talked about arguments with and punishments from their parents. Andile spoke about how discipline in white communities is ineffective because “they just go, ‘you’re not supposed to say this!’, and I’ve watched movies when they say ‘go sit in a corner by yourself’, they aren’t going to learn” (Andile, 2018). Nkosi discussed how his mother taught him respect “with a rod” (reflecting on punishments he had received), and commented that she did “quite a good job” (Nkosi, 2018). While I am not equating my interview responses with the study findings, I do think the parallelism is noteworthy.

During my interview with Thandeka, she kept coming back to the expectation in Zulu culture that children do not speak up when they feel something is wrong or unfair because that would be considered disrespectful (Thandeka, 2018). She expressed discontent for this cultural concept multiple times, explaining “just because someone doesn’t express themselves in terms of something that they don’t like, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they respect you” (Thandeka, 2018). She suggested that “as a
culture of people, we need to correct it there” (Thandeka, 2018). Is respect something that can become outdated? In my opinion, there are few things that do not change with time. When investigating general respect in Zulu culture, however, Mbele et al (2015) characterized respect as “part of a self-sustaining and instructional story passed on from one generation to the next” (p. 92). Is it true that respect is generational, taught the same way from generation to generation? Would that mean that respect does not in fact change over time?

To explore this, I asked mothers if the expectations of them as a child are the same as the expectations they have for their children. I did not get a unified response. One mother said it is completely different, two mothers said it was the same, and one mother claimed that it is the same, but not exactly. The most elaboration I received was from Mama Nandi, who was quick and certain in answering that it was different. She developed her answer, saying “Things change. We cannot think on what happened in the 20th century….Like, there’s this thing that a reverend can’t give birth to a reverend. Because things change.” (Mama Nandi, 2018). This answer does not necessarily mean that respect is not generational, however. Perhaps Mama Nandi took the expectations of her as a child and transformed them, so they would be whatever she deemed appropriate for her children. What I did not see was the teaching of respect as a “story”, as Mbele et al (2005) described it. Respect seems to function more as a list of expectations for actions and behaviors.

My Mother’s Name

I had just moved to the small town where my mother lived most of her life, until she had me. It was my first day of school, my first time getting out of my new apartment and seeing how this community lives and breathes. I was wearing my favorite shirt. I said hello to everyone I saw, following the strict, enthusiastic
instructions my mother gave me on how to behave, trying simultaneously to follow the instructions to the bus stop. Although these people did not know me, they all said hello back. And each time I passed someone whom I exchanged greetings with, I seemed to hear them go “Ahhh. Of course.” I didn’t think much of it and kept walking.

People seemed to be in a particular rush this Monday morning. I noticed nobody was thanking the bus driver as they got off. I made a point to. She smiled and, again, as I stepped down to the street I heard her mutter “well, no surprises there!”.

It continued throughout the day after pleasant interactions with an older professor and a custodial worker. One of the reactions, however, was not so favorable. Embarrassed after accidentally falling asleep in class, I tried to slink out at the end of the lecture, avoiding eye contact with the professor. As I was going up the stairs I heard him scoff and call out to me “I expected more from her.” I was the last one out of the classroom, but how could that comment be directed towards me? This man does not know who I am. Expected more from whom?

I was overwhelmed and confused. Lost in my thoughts while attempting to comprehend my day, I did not notice as someone tried to speak to me on my walk home. Once my brain was up to speed with my ears, I turned around to apologize and speak to the person. She was looking at me with a puzzled and concerned expression. In my frantic state, I lost the ability to speak and turned back around to speed walk home.

I stared at myself in the mirror for a long time that night. I decided I needed a bath. When I finally ascended from the water, body and mind more composed and at ease, I noticed it. There was stitching in the back of my shirt. I turned the shirt right side out and held it up in front of me.
“Daughter of Miss Lindiwe ‘Princess’ Mthethwa”.

In fact, my mother had stitched her name into all of my shirts. I don’t know how I didn’t notice it that morning, but now I wear my shirts proudly. I act how my mother taught me to act, knowing it was how SHE acted growing up. I am a living, breathing reflection of my incredible mother. I will do her justice. I will make her proud.

When talking to the Mamas, it seemed as if respect was so important that it transcended certain relationship dynamics. One of the reasons for this importance that was mentioned by both youth and mothers was that the way you behave, i.e. the way you respect other people, reflects directly on your mother and how she raised you. This is reflected in “My Mother’s Name.” While in my interviews it seemed important to the Mamas that their child represent them well, it was also important to their children. This concept of representing your mother, your family, at all times made me wonder if the responsibility ever got exhausting to the children. Did they ever think that their mothers expected too much from them in terms of respect? In my interviews I asked all four children exactly that, and got the same unequivocal answer: No. (I considered the possibility that my participants answered that way because answering yes would be considered disrespectful...but I digress).

Earlier in this paper I mentioned how an answer Andile gave inspired me to add a question to my interview guide that ended up as one of my favorite questions. The question was: “Is there a difference between respect for mothers and respect for fathers in your community?” I asked this question only to my youth participants, and all four responded whole heartedly “yes”. All four participants mentioned fear as being intertwined in respect for fathers, but not for mothers, and two participants used the phrase “fathers DEMAND respect”. More households in Cato Manor have absent fathers
than present fathers which creates an interesting backdrop for this question. A couple of my participants spoke about things they have witnessed, not personally experienced in their homes. Thandeka told me, “you find those households where there is a father figure, and you find that when the father figure gets home everyone just...keeps quiet, and that’s deemed as respect. But is that really respect?” (Thandeka, 2018). She went on to say that respect for fathers is “driven by fear more than anything else” (Thandeka, 2018). Andile described respect for fathers as being “mandatory”, whereas respect for mothers is freely given: “Mothers just get respect” (Andile, 2018). Despite the negative connotations of respect for fathers, two of the participants admitted that often times fathers are respected to a higher degree than mothers. Thandeka developed this idea, explaining,

“Historically there is that level of respect that people give to male figures too. I guess again it’s the whole thing of gender, you know. You do find that in households with a father figure, people would be more respectful towards that household. And in a household where there’s no father figure but the socioeconomic class of the household seems to be at a certain level, a bit higher than everyone else, there will be a certain level of respect that they’ll give to them” (Thandeka, 2018).

Perhaps this higher level of respect for fathers can be explained by cultural values rooted in patriarchy that demand more respect for men, similar to higher socioeconomic status “earning” higher levels of respect.

A critical epiphany occurred for me when I was thinking through the differences in my participants’ answers. I realized I had been thinking of “Zulu culture” as some sort of code. When there was variation in my participants’ answers, I thought that some of them must be right and some of them must be wrong, considering they are all part of
this small, close knit community of Cato Manor and they all identify as Zulu. I thought only some responses were valid. Once I realized that there is no right and wrong, only differing opinions, personalities, and perceptions, I was finally able to exhale.

That being said, during some of my interviews, the phrasing of my interviewee’s answers was so similar that it seemed as if my participants were reciting a script about respect; a ridiculous notion that demonstrates how unified the community of Cato Manor seems to be on the two-way nature of respect.

One answer to the question of mothers’ expectations of respect stands out from the others, though. That answer came from Andile, who stated that his mother did not have to respect him in order to get his respect, simply because she’s his mother, and she has done so much for him in his life (Andile, 2018). That comment from Andile was something I was expecting to hear more of than I did: statements suggesting a unique relationship with mothers which would lead to different perceptions of maternal respect than respect for any elder. Andile mentioned this, talking about the love that is present in his relationship with his mother, making it inherently different than his relationship with others, be it friends or elders (Andile, 2018). That comment was an outlier, as every other person I interviewed (mothers and children included) but one stated that respect for mothers is the same as respect for, say, an elder in the neighborhood, with the only other participant saying that respect is “similar…parallel to one another.” (Nkosi, 2018).

**The Biggest House**

My mother always said that it takes a village to raise a child,

But I don’t remember my house being that big.

Something Mama Lesedi said, which I thought would be a more common phrase, was “it takes a village to raise a child” (Mama Lesedi, 2018). On this subject, she told me,
My daughter is not only my daughter. We’ve got that thing that it belongs to the community. So, my neighbor, they can just call my daughter and say “go to the shop and buy this and that”, and if my daughter refuses, it shows that she doesn’t have respect. So a child is brought up by the community. So we belong to the community so we must respect. It starts at home. (Mama Lesedi, 2018).

In my interviews, I asked mothers and children where respect is learned. Most of my participants mentioned that respect, as a behavior, “starts at home,” but three out of four mothers mentioned actors other than themselves in teaching their children respect. Mama Hlengiwe said that children learn respect from everyone (Mama Hlengiwe, 2018). Two other mothers mentioned the help of their mothers or sisters. Revisiting my observation of Mamas in Cato Manor disciplining all children, not only their own, it would make sense that the community plays a role in how children learn respect. They learn to listen and to obey, no matter who is speaking.

Arcia and Johnson prepared a study on immigrant Mexican mothers in the United States evaluating the most desirable characteristics of children as ranked by the mothers (Arcia & Johnson, 1998). “To have a sense of what is right and wrong” was the highest ranked characteristic with “to be a good student” coming in second (Arcia & Johnson, 1998). There was a tie for third: “to be obedient”, “to be responsible”, and “to be respectful” (Arcia & Johnson, 1998). Through the interviews and surveys, Arcia and Johnson (1998) found that “to be obedient, responsible, and respectful were frequently equated with each other.” (p. 85). Though ‘immigrant Mexican mothers in the US’ and ‘Zulu mothers in Cato Manor’ are two groups with vastly different identities, the idea of respect from their children seems as if it could be a place of common ground.

The idea of obedience comes through in my interviews where mothers mention their expectations of their children to do chores and not talk back. The idea of responsibility, in my opinion, directly relates to the onus on the children to represent
their mothers and families well in the way they behave outside the home. I stand by what I said about one’s surroundings and culture shaping expectations of respect; the necessity of greeting neighbors and helping Mamas carry their bags home when they come off the minibusses are expectations that probably do not exist in Mexican immigrant culture. The foundations of maternal respect, however, as suggested in this study as well as my interviews, seem to transcend cultural boundaries.

In one of the final days of writing this ISP, I did one last search for “respect for mothers” on a new search engine. An article titled “Cross-Cultural Understanding Among Peoples of African Descent: African Continuities as a Unifying Agent” (Barnes-Harden, 1984) came up, and I opened the PDF, expecting to skim through and not find much material related to my topic. I was looking at a section of the article which compiles these “African Continuities”, and there it was, item (c) under the section titled Family: respect for mothers (Barnes-Harden, 1984). Barnes-Harden does not go into “respect for mothers”, but this list was not superfluous. Respect for mothers is part of African culture, though it seems largely ignored by scholars. It is a basic instinct.

Conclusions & Reflection

To summarize everything I learned during this process would be impossible. I expanded my mind in so many ways, gaining knowledge about family dynamics, Zulu culture, black culture, and paternal versus maternal respect. I learned more about myself than I ever have: things I am capable of, things that I am good at, and things that I am not so good at. I interviewed eight people that have experiences and lead lives worlds different from my own (worlds that are 8400 miles, or 13500 kilometers apart, to be exact). I laughed, I cried, I sweat, I learned, I wrote, I read, I smiled, I sweat more, and I wrote more.
Now what about respect? I learned that there is no one way to define respect. Respect, much like many concepts in the area of human behavior, is fluid. It changes depending on the eye of the beholder. Respect for mothers mirrors the fluidity of respect in general. For some, respecting their mother has everything to do with love and gratitude. For others, respecting their mother is more about doing the dishes after dinner and not talking back. For most, it is both. Respect is both a noun and a verb. One respects their mother AND has respect for their mother.

The respect I personally had for mothers everywhere grew exponentially during this project. While listening to the mothers speak and tell their stories, I could only hope I would, one day, be as decent and wise. When it comes to their children, mothers are teachers and role models and friends. Mothers (or at least the mothers I interviewed) do not put themselves on a pedestal; they do not expect their children to respect them more than they respect others. Respect cannot be considered alone; likewise for maternal respect. Community dynamics, family dynamics, and cultural expectations must also be contemplated.

Respect for mothers in Zulu culture has little existing research. I went into this project thinking I would have groundbreaking, breathtaking findings to share. I don’t. That is okay. Instead, I have authentic opinions and unique perspectives. In some areas I have conflicting views and others exist in complete harmony.

25/11/2018 1:33 PM
I have one week left in this country. One week to take it all in so that I’ll remember-
What the air smells like
The sound of music and incessant beeping coming from the minibus taxis, the sound of my Mama’s voice.
The way the purple trees grab your eyes as you drive.
The delight in a Zulu person’s eyes when I, a white girl, would graciously say “ngiyabonga”.

I want to remember my conversation with Gabisile. Her honesty, how she laughed and bared her bones.
I want to remember the intoxicating feeling of sitting down and writing pages at a time and the anxious excitement that overtook my body in the Uber rides to my interviews.
I want Thandeka, Mama Hlengiwe, Mama Nandi, Nkosi, Mama Lethabo, Gabisile, Andile, and Mama Lesedi’s narratives to live within me—an eternal flame.
I will remember, and I will be back.
(Robertson, Personal Journal Entry, 2018)

Exhale.

Recommendations for Further Study

Due to monetary and time limitations, my sample size is small and cannot represent Cato Manor as a whole. In order to have more significant and applicable results, I would suggest that a larger number of people be interviewed on this topic. It

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6 “Ngiyabonga” means “thank you” in isiZulu. (isiZulu.net, 2018)
would be fascinating to see new themes that emerge, and if the themes that I found remain important with a larger number of participants.

Additionally, if I had unlimited time and resources, I would have also interviewed pairs of white, non-Zulu South African mothers and children. Seeing the similarities and differences in the perspectives of black, Zulu South Africans and white, non-Zulu South Africans that often have entirely different experiences would be fascinating. If a study were done that included both of those groups, asking about behaviors and respect before and after the end of apartheid would be especially note-worthy.
References


List of Primary Sources


Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent form that was read and signed by all applicants

CONSENT FORM
1. Brief description of the purpose of this project

I seek to explore the nature of the respect a child has for his or her mother. I will do this by interviewing both mothers and children, asking them questions about the respect in their relationship with their mother/child. This project will contribute information about mother-child dynamics and respect, which is a research topic with little existing knowledge; however, the small number of interviewees limits the scope of this project cannot represent the larger population of Cato Manor. I will convey my findings through a narrative, documenting my personal process with this project as well as including a narrative representing my findings when it comes to maternal respect. The interviewee can skip any question they wish, choose to end the interview at any time, and if they wish to withdraw their interview completely from my project, they can let me know by November 27th. Recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be kept private until they are destroyed after the completion of my ISP.

2. Rights Notice

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.
a. **Privacy** - all information you present in this interview may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know.

b. **Anonymity** - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless you choose otherwise.

c. **Confidentiality** - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to you.

I understand that I will receive **no gift** or direct benefit for participating in the study.

I confirm that the learner has given me the address of the nearest School for International Training Study Abroad Office should I wish to go there for information. (404 Cowey Park, Cowey Rd, Durban).

I know that if I have any questions or complaints about this study that I can contact anonymously, if I wish, the Director/s of the SIT South Africa Community Health Program (Zed McGladdery 0846834982)

**Appendix 2: Interview Guides**

**Children**

1) Ask age and if they identify as Zulu. Ask who raised them.

2) Tell me about your relationship with your mother.

3) How would you define respect? (Ask for examples of actions, etc)

4) Did your mother teach you respect?

5) Would you say your mother expects you to respect her?

   a. In what ways?
b. How is the respect you show towards your mother different than the respect you’d show towards an elderly neighbor?

6) Describe a time you were disrespectful towards your mother.

7) Do you consider yourself a respectful person?
   a. Is what you’re describing different than how you respect your mother?

8) Tell me about a time/give an example, if you have one, of your mother expecting too much from you in terms of respect? (A time you felt it was unfair... etc)

9) How important is respect in your relationship with your mother?

10) [explain the research I did linking the word -esaba with respect] Do you think there’s a relationship between fear and respect?

11) Is there a difference between respect for mothers and respect for fathers in your community?

**Mothers**

1) Ask age and if they identify as Zulu

2) Tell me about your relationship with your child

3) How would you define respect? (Ask for examples)
   a. Is this general idea of respect the same as respect between mothers-children? Or do mothers and children have a unique type of respect?

4) Did you teach your children to respect you? If so, how.
a. Where else do you think they learned respect?

5) Tell me about a time you remember your child disrespecting you.

6) Do you think it’s important for your child to be respectful?
   a. Why, how important.

7) What are your expectations for your child to act respectfully IN YOUR HOME?
   a. Ask for examples

8) How important is respect in your relationship with your child?

9) Is the respect you receive from your child different than the respect your child gives other people?

10) Do you think you were respectful as a child?
    a. Are the expectations of you as a child the same as what you expect from your child?

11) [explain my research on -esaba and link to respect] Ask about if there’s a relationship between fear and respect.
Appendix 3: LRB/IRB Action Form
Appendix 4: Consent to Use Form

Access, Use, and Publication of ISP/FSP

Student Name: Sarah Jane Robertson

Email Address: srober6@tulane.edu

Title of ISP/FSP:
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RESPECT YOUR MOTHER? A NARRATIVE APPROACH EXPLORING MATERNAL RESPECT THROUGH PERSPECTIVES OF MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Program and Term/Year: Fall 2018

Student research (Independent Study Project, Field Study Project) is a product of field work and as such students have an obligation to assess both the positive and negative consequences of their field study. Ethical field work, as stipulated in the SIT Policy on Ethics, results in products that are shared with local and academic communities; therefore copies of ISP/FSPs are returned to the sponsoring institutions and the host communities, at the discretion of the institution(s) and/or community involved.

By signing this form, I certify my understanding that:

1. I retain ALL ownership rights of my ISP/FSP project and that I retain the right to use all, or part, of my project in future works.

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Sarah Jane Robertson 25/11/2018
Student Signature Date