# Mothering in socioeconomically marginalised communities in South Africa: A conceptual development

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From a sociopsychological perspective, mothering is variously described in the research literature. This theory synthesis research design study aims to integrate our current understanding of "the familiar" phenomenon of mothering by asking: (i) how mothering is understood across diverse realities within socioeconomically marginalised contexts in South Africa; and (ii) how the domain of mothering in the South African context integrates across theoretical perspectives of motherhood. From the present analysis, findings suggest that mothering needs to be viewed across contexts of being lone, absent, replaced, shared, marginalised, and disrupted. In conclusion, "collective" mothering presents a source of resilience in family functioning in socioeconomically marginalised South African communities.

Keywords: family institution, mothering, socioeconomically marginalised communities

## Introduction

In African literature, novels often describe mothers as life-givers, creators, providers, cradle-rockers, nurturers, or goddesses (Akujobi, 2011; Roscoe, 1971). Writers use expressions like "Mother Africa" or "the motherland" and ascribe great power to mothers in children's lives (Gethoi, 1996; Schipper, 1987). Undoubtedly, mothers play a powerful role in families in many impoverished communities in South Africa, especially in view of their many responsibilities for children and other dependents in the family, providing an income, being present in the household, giving emotional support, raising, and protecting children et cetera (Magwasa, 2010). In South Africa, single motherhood and female-headed households are increasing, particularly in rural provinces where the rate is approaching 50% (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2018). Yet, the evidence on mothering with deprivation is less well aggregated. This theoretical analysis synthesises the evidence on mothering in socioeconomically marginalised contexts in South Africa, that may apply to other developing country settings.

Over the last decade, the public debate in South Africa has repeatedly pointed out that the "family is in crisis" (Rabe & Naidoo, 2015, p. 2). Policy makers describe the family institution as "broken" and "in need of healing" (e.g., in Holborn & Eddy, 2011, p. 6). The "crisis" is linked to complex realities of families in impoverished communities suffering from unemployment and the pandemic of HIV and AIDS. Almost one out of two fathers do not live with their children (Knijn & Patel, 2018), which has been discussed as a "crisis of fathers and fatherhood" (Ratele & Nduna, 2018, p. 29). One in three women in the poorest households have reported physical violence from a partner (National Department of Health [NDoH], Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], South African Medical Research Council [SAMRC], & ICF, 2019), an epidemic level that has been called a national crisis by the president (Francke, 2019).

The family stands out as a site of state intervention for health promotion (Morison et al., 2016) and the White Paper on Families (Department of Social Development, 2013) advocates for "stable, healthy families". Yet, the Department of Social Development receives criticism for taking a "social treatment approach which could be associated with clinical psychology or clinical social work", partly due to a fixation on what a family should "look like" (form) instead of how "it works" (functioning: Knijn & Patel, 2018, p. 256). The need for an approach that focuses on "functioning" can be found in the definition of family in South Africa because there is great variation in how the family works across dynamic and fluid connections of moral, economic, social, and emotional bonds.

South Africa is seen as "especially rich in family diversity", being "the only country in the world where both same-sex marriages and polygyny are legally recognised" (Rabe, 2017, p. 327). Several discourses acknowledging the diversity use a functioning approach, speaking in terms of care dynamics in the family (e.g., Rabe, 2017), "alternative masculinities" where men engage in domestic work traditionally associated with women (Shirani & Henwood, 2011), and "intergenerational reciprocity" where family members across generations support each other in times of hardship (e.g., Makiwane et al., 2017). Mothering represents another, yet little unified, aspect of family functioning, which is important to understand given its powerful function in many families.

## Rationale of the study

With increased access for women to societal arenas like formal education and labour, the premises for mothering have changed radically since Walker's (1995) phenomenal contribution to the topic of mothering 26 years ago at the onset of the post-Apartheid era. Magwaza (2010) pointed out that the concept of mothering needs a redefinition. While conceptual developments in the context of South African communities are on the rise (e.g., Moore, 2013;

Ntshongwana et al., 2015), mothering has commonly not been the unit of analysis. This is unlike in the international literature, which has explored mothering as a concept of its own for decades (e.g., Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 2010a; Rich, 1976; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). Rabe and Naidoo (2015) claim that mothering as a research topic in South Africa generally has been "taken for granted" (p. 2). Mothering may have been overshadowed by the solid bulk of research on fathering (e.g., Richter & Morrell, 2006), as its "crisis" perhaps stands out as needing more urgent attention. While feminist scholars initially propelled mothering as a research topic (Arendell, 2000), it may be suffering from neglect as a distinct field of feminism internationally (Kawash, 2011), unlike fathering in the field of masculinities (Connell, 2006).

**Significance of mothering**

Researchers may overlook mothering because of its familiar and universal nature (Hays, 1996). Mothering has been going on everywhere always, and we all know something about mothering; we have a mother, we know mothers, or we are mothers ourselves, as explained by Walker (1995, p. 424):

> *Motherhood is so familiar an institution and experience that it does not need rigorous definition. This is itself revealing about the enormously powerful normative authority of the term—and the implicit universalism towards which our common-sense understandings and experiences of motherhood so readily propel us.*

Compared to fathering, masculinities, and feminism, it is clear to the author that the concept of mothering is positioned as the least theorised element connected to the family institution. The conceptual lens offered by this paper involves an assimilation of previously developed aspects of mothering that helps us see "the familiar" more clearly. Thus, this paper aims to pick up the call by Magwaza (2010) to critically examine the *focal phenomenon* of mothering, meaning what is observable through available knowledge but has not yet been sufficiently addressed in the research, and that the various aspects of the phenomenon offers a complimentary value towards conceptualisation (Jaakkola, 2020). Mothering may gain by an analysis within a wider motherhood theoretical framework that has not earlier been applied in a South African family research context.

For the synthesis of the evidence, the selected publications are presented in the context of other writings and interpreted through the following chain of argumentation: (i) defining mothering in traditional South Africa and situating mothering in contemporary socioeconomically marginalised contexts in a background chapter; (ii) approaching mothering through the theoretical framework of motherhood studies (method theory); (iii) integrating maternal practices across diverse situations (domain theory) in a findings and discussion chapter ; (iv) proposing a redefinition of mothering and connecting new mothering with the institution of motherhood in an overall discussion, and finally; (v) explaining limitations of this study and giving recommendations for future research and policy.

### *Defining mothering in traditional South Africa*

Reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth are primarily biological processes, but the norms for care after giving birth are fully defined by society and culture (Hollway, 2001). *Mothering* relates to the social processes of child rearing, and it is sometimes useful to treat it as a verb, as something one does, while a *mother* signifies as a person who has given birth and/or raises a child (Arendell, 2000). Mothering goes on at the very core of the family institution, which again represents a core societal institution (Makiwane et al., 2017). Children are traditionally raised in a "family community" and socialised to be parented by grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and to know cousins like siblings. Mothering has never been an exclusive task of biological mothers as the family as a unit has been collectively responsible for child-rearing (Wolf, 2005).

During the apartheid period (1948–1994), forced removals and dislocations split families in a way that weakened the ability of families to provide care (Bozalek, 1999). The analysis of Cock (1989, in Maisela & Ross, 2018) found mothers being left with two options: (i) either to leave their children at home to go and engage as domestic workers in the white areas usually situated far away; or (ii) to stay with their children in the rural areas designated for black people, do all the household chores, provide a living through subsistence farming, and rely on remittances from their labour migrant husbands. Thus, mothering was either done in absence while providing an income, or in presence while being burdened by labour on the farm and dependent on the husband's financial transfers.

Mothering in black African communities post-Apartheid needs to be seen through the intersection of male dominance, race, and ethnicity, where mothering connects to childbirth, the provision of physical and emotional care, and socialisation into the values of the social (sub-)group. Additionally, in a patriarchal society, major decision-making in the family related to schooling or housing was not usually a part of mothering responsibilities (Walker, 1995). As Campbell (1990) put it: "women's power within the family falls within the boundaries of male dominance" (p. 5).

### *Situating mothering in contemporary socioeconomically marginalised contexts*

Approaching a quarter of a century into South African democracy often perceived as "progressive" and "egalitarian" in its constitution, and years down the line in the fight for gender equality and women's rights, other opportunities and challenges define mothering in socioeconomically marginalised contexts. At the same time as women's access to education has increased significantly, women give birth to fewer children than earlier (with a general fertility rate of 2.4; The World Bank, 2018). More women than men enrol in post-school education (Stats SA, 2020), and more and more women are engaged in the formal labour force (Mosomi, 2019). This means that mothering is more often combined with roles outside the domestic sphere. At the same time, teenage pregnancy remains high, making young motherhood not

uncommon. Single motherhood is also common as 40% of mothers are single (van den Berg & Makusha, 2018).

Yet, a growing diversity of family structures and care dynamics (Rabe, 2017) indicates that mothering goes on across various family constellations. Rabe (2017) notes that 62% of children live in extended family households – such as three generation, skip-generation with older persons, or sibling families with or without adults and children – where mothering may be done by a grandmother, older sister, aunt, or others. Twenty-five percent of children live in nuclear family households (Hall et al., 2018), where the interplay with fathering is central to mothering. However, as more women remain childless, not entering motherhood is no longer alienised (Stats SA, 2019).

While educational and vocational opportunities for women have increased in post-apartheid South Africa, they have not yet reached their potential. Low economic growth combined with an extremely high rate of formal unemployment (29%: Stats SA, 2019) contribute to skewed income distribution in disfavour of women (Knijn & Patel, 2018). It is the author's view that educated mothers often do not get credibility for their educational efforts, but instead struggle to find formal employment. This suggests that there are boundaries to mothering in any type of family constellation. Additionally, gender imbalance complicates mothering through the brutality of intimate partner violence (Rabe, 2017). The victimisation of mothers puts their ability to care for children at risk. Women are also disproportionally infected by HIV, as 63% of the 7.5 million adults living with HIV in the country are women (UNAIDS, 2018). New HIV infections among young women aged 15–24 years were more than double those among young men, which indicates that young women may enter motherhood at the same time as they learn about their HIV status. Sixty-five percent of adult women living with HIV are on treatment compared to 65% of men diagnosed with HIV (UNAIDS, 2018). Antiretroviral treatment has reduced maternal mortality over the last decade (Moodley & Pattinson, 2018) and nearly eliminated mother-to-child transmission. This can be seen as evidence that mothers have made great efforts to stay alive and safely mother their children. At the same time, there are 1.4 million orphans due to AIDS in the country (UNAIDS, 2018), who are mothered by people in the family, the community, or others.

### *The theoretical framework of motherhood studies*
From a focal phenomenon departure, this paper explores mothering by acknowledging the variability of child-rearing practices across time and place and the importance of not degrading multiple and complex meanings. The theoretical framework of *motherhood studies* developed by O'Reilly (2010a,b) explicates as the "method theory" to approach mothering in this setting. This framework is grounded in maternal theory developed by feminist scholars such as Hill Collins, Rich, and Ruddick in North America (O'Reilly, 2010). Although developed in North America, the framework appears valuable in a South African family setting because its social constructionist approach allows for the inclusion of fluid and complex social connections (O'Reilly, 2010).

The theory of motherhood offers multiple perspectives to identify key areas and resources for family functioning through mothering. One perspective refers to a level of analysis as the task of mothering; "maternal practice" or "experienced motherhood", exercised through preservative love, nurturance, and training (Ruddick, 1994). Maternal practice was first launched in reaction to what has become another layer of aggregation; "patriarchal motherhood" (e.g., Ruddick, 1994), which was derived from Rich's (1976) feministic work post-World War II, relates to the idea of motherhood as a male-defined societal institution. Patriarchal motherhood relates maternal practices in society to a social institution that "functions ideologically and politically", where these practices "are established social mechanisms and significant cultural practices that regulate human behaviour according to the needs of a community, not individuals" (O'Reilly, 2010b, p. 572). In research, mothering emerges as the female-defined area of motherhood by emphasising lived experiences of child-rearing as people who both conform to and/or resist the patriarchal institution. Within this field, studies pay attention to the diversity of child-rearing practices observed ethnographically in different contexts (e.g., Barlow & Chapin, 2010); diverse experiences related to race, class, sexuality, and social status (e.g., Kawash, 2011); and to migrant-, single-, lesbian mothering (e.g., Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018), as well as constructions of parenting stereotypes (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). This study uses the analytic levels of "maternal practice" and "patriarchal motherhood" to systematise meanings of mothering. Further, other perspectives including "maternal identities" and "maternal agencies" serve as tools to interpret the nexus of mothering and motherhood for conceptual development.

### Goal of the study
This study aims to synthesise the research evidence to identify resources for mothering and family functioning in the South African context by addressing the following research questions:
- How is mothering understood across diverse realities within socioeconomically marginalised contexts in South Africa?
- How does the domain of mothering in the given context integrate across theoretical perspectives of the motherhood theoretical framework?

### Methods
### *Research design*
By using a theory synthesis research design (Jaakkola, 2020), this paper aims to inductively seek differing meanings of mothering and to integrate previously unconnected pieces of the topic in a new way. A theory synthesis research design "seeks to achieve conceptual integration across multiple theories or literature streams [and] offer a new or enhanced view of a concept by linking previously unconnected or incompatible pieces in a new way" (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 21). This included a collection of available literature streams of topics of mothering, which represented a so called "domain theory", meaning the data of this paper (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014). Data on

mothering from South Africa (domain theory) was, for the first time, connected to the motherhood theoretical framework by O' Reilly (2010), which in this research design reads as "method theory" (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014), that represented levels of analysis in this paper.

### Search strategy

While the design requires literature searches as a tool, it is not the ultimate objective of a conceptual paper (Jaakkola, 2020), as it aims to look beyond the descriptions of extant knowledge. To stick to the ideal of adhering to the single conceptual theme of this paper, the search strategy emphasised to reduce incommensurable bits, and therefore obliged to the following inclusion criteria; both conceptual and empirical research on mothering (being mothered and doing mothering) from socioeconomically marginalised contexts in South Africa between 2013 and 2019. The descriptors included but were not limited to mother* AND South Africa*, carer*, guardian*, foster*, grandmother*, aunt*, sister*, orphan*, step*, (un)combined with concept* and theor* in title or abstract in the data bases of PsychInfo, Web of Knowledge, and Social Index. In addition, reference searches based on articles identified through the data bases were done.

The searches indicated that mothering connected to an array of topics, but most often ad hoc to topics such as the pandemic of HIV and AIDS (e.g., Le Croix et al., 2019), domestic violence, or psychopathologies (e.g., Redinger et al., 2020). Such publications were excluded because they did not underscore mothering as the chief unit of analysis. As indicated in Table 1, nine publications were selected and representing the data material.

### Findings and discussion

The analysis of the selected material of nine publications from the domain of mothering resulted in looking at mothering ("maternal practices") across challenging situations of everyday life in this context, such as (i) "lone mothering"; (ii) "absent, replaced, or shared mothering", (iii) "marginalised mothering"; and (iv) "disrupted mothering". To better understand the complexities of mothering in socioeconomically marginalised contexts, I will look at each of these situations in turn. While the connotations of these terms – such as "lone" – may reduce and stigmatise, they are simply used as descriptive tools to grasp various circumstances that frame mothering. Moreover, the connotations are not exclusive where the situations of (i), (ii), and (iii) may overlap (iv) and (v).

### Lone mothering

'Lone' in this context is deemed a meaningful description, as it refers to situations where a mother is not necessarily "alone", but where mothers do not have a partner or do not cohabit and stand as the main caregiver for a child (Ntshongwana et al., 2015). Where household structures are often fluid and cohabitations not necessarily clear (Posel, 2001), an operationalisation of "lone motherhood" resulted in identifying five million lone mothers in the country, of which the great majority were black Africans (Ntshongwana et al., 2015). Most lone mothers care for biological children (79%), yet one million are *de facto*

lone mothers caring for a non-biological child. Most lone mothers are not in paid work and suffer from high levels of poverty. Ntshongwana and colleagues (2015) divide maternal practices into a threefold model of "ABC": A) emotional allegiances; B) material providence; and C) physical presence. Lone mothers negotiate combinations of the three in various ways. For instance, mothering "AC" means daily presence in the household and giving emotional support, yet not providing an income, whereas mothering "AB" means being absent from the daily lives yet making an income. When mothering involves "ABC", as experienced by adolescent sons and daughters in the Limpopo province (Spjeldnaes et al., 2014), lone mothering means hectic mothering: "She is a caring mom, she likes talking with me, but sometimes when she is working, she doesn't have time to talk. Especially when she comes home late. She works too much" (Spjeldnaes et al., 2014, p. 65). Even if this is about longing for more physically and emotionally present mothering by those being mothered, the hectic mothering means that mothers serve as role models to adolescent children who admire the multiple tasks executed in a context of absent labour-migrant or deserted fathers. Thus, lone mothering entails an array of combinations of various responsibilities that are not static constellations, but dynamic relational bonds to the object of mothering.

### Absent, replaced, shared mothering

Absent, replaced, or shared mothering was particularly described in the literature about student, working, and teenage mothers. The competing roles of being a mother and a student or employer are reconciled in a setting were families struggle to make ends meet. Research on student mothers (Maisela & Ross, 2018; in Moore, 2013) and working mothers (Mkhize & Msomi, 2016) found that performing core values of maternal practice according to the "ABC" model (Ntshongwana et al., 2015) was challenging. Student or working mothering often means absence, where mothers need to live in student dorms or move into the larger cities for employment relying upon support from female kin for childcare. Thus, mothering is replaced by grand-mothering, or by fathering, keeping mothering alive from a distance though mobile chats with their children as well as visits whenever possible. This brings the role-modelling aspect of demonstrating the possibilities of going for higher education and careers into the picture.

Eleven percent of all registered births in South Africa is by teenage mothers. In 2018, more than 3 000 girl children aged 10–14 years old, and more than one hundred thousand adolescents aged 15–19 years old, gave birth (Stats SA, 2017). Maternal practices of the "ABC" model (Ntshongwana et al., 2015) are challenged due to the lack of available resources associated with early motherhood. Material provision in terms of income and housing is usually poor, as young motherhood most often equals single motherhood and heavily relies on material support from one's own family and network. Stigmatised by their community and marginalised from youth activities and schooling represent stress, that exacerbates when one at the same time discovers that one is HIV-positive (Adeagbo,

**Table 1.** Included studies and their key findings

| Researchers | Focus | Methods | Key findings of maternal practices in challenging situations of everyday life |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ntshongwana et al. (2015) | Operationalising a working definition of lone motherhood, which has analytical value of exposing challenging situations of mothering. | Conceptual design using household survey data | *Lone mothering*: when mothers care for children without a partner present. Five million mothers in SA identified as "lone" and suffers from poverty. Maternal practices divide into a model of A) emotional allegiances, B) material providence and C) physical presence. |
| Spjeldnaes et al. (2015) | Conceptualising mothering from the perspectives of adolescents' experiences of being mothered and envisaging parenthood. | Photo-assisted interviews, diaries, and group discussions among adolescent men and women | *Lone mothering*: means hectic mothering as all three aspects, ABC, in the model (Ntshongwana et al, 2015) affect the practice. *Disrupted mothering* means mothering disturbed by HIV and AIDS, in this case by protecting adolescent children from getting infected. |
| Maisela & Ross (2018) | Exploring the challenges and strategies of university-level mothers from feminist care and gender role perspectives. | Semi-structured interviews with students who were mothers | *Absent, replaced, shared mothering* means that reconciling competing roles of student and mother required support from family and friends while being (partly) absent from home, and replaced or shared care. |
| Mkhize & Msomi (2016) | Investigating the work and career experiences of African, single mothers from low socio-economic backgrounds. | Interviews with mothers as semi-professionals or as labourers | *Absent, replaced, shared mothering* means struggles of combining the needs of mothering as a professional labourer in absence of a father figure, and relying on sharing care responsibilities with female kin. |
| Moore (2013) | Exploring changes in conceptualisation of motherhood and how maternal identity transmits through generations. | National attitudinal survey and life history interviews with mothers across three generations | *Absent, replaced, shared mothering* means that a "good provider and caring role" in older generations develops towards valuing personal goals/student life in the younger mothers, but that mothering for various reasons across the generations requires support from older women in the family. |
| Adeagbo (2019) | Exploring the complexities of experiences of unplanned motherhood of young, HIV positive women, advocating for global, feminist policies. | In-depth interviews with HIV-positive adolescent mothers | *Absent, replaced, shared mothering* means that maintaining maternal practices is "hard" and involves stress, which requires the need of support from family to care for the child. *Disrupted mothering* means that the pregnancy and raising of small children interrupts by mother's illness of HIV and AIDS. |
| van der Mark et al. (2019) | Understanding experiences caring for disabled children in resource-poor context. | Semi-structured interviews and participatory group sessions with mothers of disabled children | *Marginalised mothering*: means that maternal practices go on at the margin of the community not necessarily accepting the terms of their child, being a small, overlooked, and vulnerable group of mothers. |
| Soldati-Kahimbaara (2016) | Reasoning behind why mothers are "outing" after the "coming out" of their adult children in a setting were LGB may still face harassment and violence. | In-depth qualitative interviews with mothers of sexual minority child | *Marginalised mothering*: means that maternal practices involve disclosure of their adult children' sexual minority status by normalizing LGB and protect their adult children from violence and harassment. |
| Goodrum et al. (2019) | Examining the relation between mothers' quality of care and their victimisation history. | Self-reported questionnaires of female caregivers of children. | *Disrupted mothering* means that mothering in terms of involvement and relationship quality with the child interrupts by cumulative trauma from sexual abuse. |

2019). Thus, maintaining maternal practices is described as "hard" (Adeagbo, 2019, p. 1). Early mothering often involves stress (Adeagbo, 2019) and relates to a need of shared mothering with adults in the family, who are also involved in mothering the teenage mother.

### Marginalised mothering

Marginalised mothering may incorporate different meanings. One of them represents when the child itself is marginalised in the community. An ethnographic study (van der Mark et al., 2019) among 30 mothers in a resource-poor setting documented mothering of "disabled children" in "a very unsafe environment and poverty" (p. 96). The poor living conditions and crime in the community, coupled with great fear of stigma related to "disabled children", contributed to maternal practices in very particular ways. Testimonies reveal mothers' stories of neglect, abuse, and experiencing disrespect towards their children from public care institutions and limited support from their network. Mothers disclose that they "create their own small world" (p. 95), where maternal practice overall means very much solitary caring and protecting their children from negative attitudes towards disabled people in the community. The study indicated that lone mothering in these surroundings takes its toll on the well-being of the mother.

Another situation illuminated through the ethnographic study by Soldati-Kahimbaara (2016), describes mothering in the context of "coming out" as mothers of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) adult children. Upon learning about their children's sexuality, mothering entails a dilemma of if, and when this should be "outed". This is known as a "closet time" of confusion, shock, and denial of the new information about their adult child. The dilemma is very much grounded in the will to protect one's adult children from the harassment and violence that they could be exposed to. It can also be understood as an act of solidarity, demonstrating one's unconditional love, and contributing to the normalisation of LGB.

### Disrupted mothering

Disrupted mothering was described in terms of disturbed by illness in the mother or by violence in the family. Exposure to interpersonal violence (NDoH et al., 2019) presents a challenge. In a study of 99 black South African female caregivers in a township outside Cape Town, Goodrum and colleagues (2019) found that those who reported having been sexually abused as a child were also less involved with their own child; the parent-child relationship was of poorer quality with less warmth, and they spent less time with their children. Thus, victimised mothers may practice emotionally disturbed mothering, where children suffer from the poorer quality of the relationship with their mother. Protection of their children, who suffer from witnessing the violence, stands out as central to mothering.

Exposure to the pandemic levels of HIV and AIDS in this context represents another challenging mothering situation (Adeagbo, 2019). First and foremost, mothering entails protection in this context. Protecting one's infant while knowing one is HIV-positive raises great concerns in terms of the risk of transmitting the virus through breastfeeding (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). Cultural practices sometimes complicate adhering to the recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding the first six months, but Adeagbo's study (2019) indicates that maternal grandmothers appeared to be the most enabling support of young mothers. Additionally, protection against HIV and AIDS is a core responsibility of mothering adolescent children by way of protecting them from getting infected. This involves including advice about HIV prevention and healthy sexuality in guiding their transition to adulthood. One adolescent man revealed about his transition to manhood: "I only share my problems with my mother" (Spjeldnaes et al., 2014, p. 65). This indicates that mothering in this setting means establishing a close emotional bond of trust to make adolescent children dare to share their very personal concerns.

### Proposition: Redefining mothering?

The above descriptions demonstrate how maternal practices involve negotiations of physical presence, emotional care, material provision, role modelling, guidance, advice, protection, normalisation, and solidarity across complex life situations. The responsibilities make visible new and more diverse maternal practices, in the same vein as a review in North America (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019) that identified great variations of stereotypes associated with mothering in contrast to more narrow stereotypes on fathering. Diverse maternal practices need to be understood in view of cultural norms of mothering by asking questions based upon the motherhood framework (O'Reilly, 2010a), such as:

- Who is mothering, and is anyone who commits themself to the demands of maternal practices doing mothering?
- How does mothering combine with other identities?
- How does mothering represent agency?

### Mothering pertains to a wide range of people

Who is involved in all those tasks of mothering, for instance, when mothers migrate to study or work, when mothers fall sick from AIDS, or when mothers are victimised by domestic violence? Magwaza (2010) argued that a redefinition should include mothering in relation to biology, age, and gender.

Since mothering never has been an exclusive task of biological mothers in this context (Wolf, 2005), it is far from a new phenomenon to observe that people in the "family community" take on maternal tasks. Yet in an era of AIDS, more people outside the "family community" (Magwaza, 2010), such as female principals in schools, involve themselves in mothering pupils (Lumby & Azaola, 2013).

Mothering small children across the life span, while still being a child oneself or into old age, has become more common in the era of HIV and AIDS (Maundeni & Malinga-Musamba, 2013). Support from (great) grandmothers is considered a norm, but "[HIV and AIDS] orphan-kin care-giving involves full-time parenting by an adult kin" (Maundeni & Malinga-Musamba, 2013, p. 108). Maternal practices may start early in life, as

fifteen-year-old "Linda" who heads the family and cares for young siblings says: "Being a mother to the boys now gives me a reason to stay alive" (Magwaza, 2010, pp.109–110). "Linda" calls herself a mother, but in most HIV and AIDS literature she would be referred to as a child (Magwaza, 2010).

Additionally, mothering may be performed by men in this context (e.g., Magwaza, 2010). Ruddick (1994) suggests that mothering is not exclusive to women and that also men may mother, while Doucet (2010) disagrees when she asked in a US-setting whether men who take the primary caretaker role are mothering and not fathering. Doucet (2010) suggests that we should take off our maternal lens. Given the great set of various responsibilities attached to maternal practices, often in settings with absent father figures, it is perhaps not relevant to take off maternal lenses, but to explore how men as fathers embrace a wider set of responsibilities (van den Berg & Makusha, 2018).

*Mothering combines, competes with, and shapes identities*
Another layer of analysis relates to attaching identity to maternal practices, the implications of becoming a mother, and how becoming a mother influences the sense of self. It is about how a mother's identity is being shaped by the institution of motherhood and by how women experience mothering (O'Reilly, 2010a). Becoming a mother is critical and described as "God-given" and "sacred" (Akujobi, 2011, p. 2).

Currently, young women more often combine a maternal identity with other demanding and fulfilling identities, such as full-time student or employee. The higher completion rate of university grades among women (Stats SA, 2020), combined with a decreasing fertility rate (The World Bank, 2018), indicates that values attached to maternal identity may be in a process of change. Reconciling competing roles appear more accepted than earlier. Moore's (2013) mixed-methods analysis in three generations of mothers indicates that solely cultivating the "good provider and caring role" ideal of the older mother generations is developing towards an emphasis on reaching personal goals and realising "the project of self" (p. 151).

The sense of self interplays closely with various challenging mothering scenarios: When motherhood is not the desired and planned route to adult identity, as is the case for many teenage mothers; when motherhood opens new and unexpected avenues to building identities, as is the case for mothers of LGB children and of disabled children; or when motherhood makes you (dis)close sensitive aspects of yourself, as is the case for HIV-positive mothers.

*Mothering represents agency*
Maternal agency represents yet another layer of analysis that connects with the power and empowerment related to maternal practices and identities when she asks: "how (do) mothers individually and collectively refuse and resist the ideology and institution of patriarchal motherhood, and what is needed to empower women" (O'Reilly, 2006, p.15). Empowering and oppressive meanings of motherhood coexist in view of a wider definition of who

is mothering and the availability of alternative identities for women.

Maternal practices represent empowering experiences with regards to power in relation to dependent children (Akujobi, 2011). Mothering includes influential activities like transmitting knowledge, advice, and values to their children (e.g. Spjeldnaes et al., 2014). Being a role model represents an empowering experience of knowing that maternal activities influence children's choices. Demonstrating solidarity and protection of children who are marginalised in society represent agencies of mothering. Moreover, I argue that solitary mothering combined with sole income provision demonstrates great powers of "making it" all , which shows how maternal practices resist a patriarchal motherhood institution, where fatherhood typically represents the power over major household decisions.

In a Western context, working mothers have been pictured as being "subjects in their own right", taking care of their own needs in a way that made psychoanalytic feminist interpreters view "working" as beneficial for maternal practices and for children (Hollway, 2001). Yet, in economically deprived areas in South Africa, we should be wary of interpreting new responsibilities of maternal practices and new roads to womanhood in this line of thought. The load of responsibilities attached to maternal practices and competing identities entail great pressure and huge expectations that not necessarily speak as agency or self-fulfilment to people involved in the practice; but rather as strategies of survival and protection of children in harsh environments.

### Connecting new mothering with the institution of motherhood
Mothering in the challenging situations (e.g., teenage mothering) of this cultural and socioeconomic setting, is characterised by being replaced-, shared-, absent, or even marginalised or lone. At the same time, a broad set of people (regardless of biology, age, and gender) shape identities across these circumstances and participate in the many types of maternal responsibilities (e.g., providing an income).

On the one hand mothering interprets toward an ideology of power and agency because of the rising opportunities involved when combining maternal identities with other identities (e.g., a student) and of the sharing of responsibilities in the family and network. This nuances the growing international literature on alternative visions of motherhood (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018). It shows that mothering increasingly implies working on the "project of the self" through education, developing vocational capabilities, where mothers become role models and gain more power in household decision-making – a slow movement away from the traditional patriarchal framework of male dominance (Walker, 1995). This echoes discourses in feminism where mothers are autonomous subjects also detached from their children, which benefits the children (Hollway, 2001) by way of serving as a role model for educational efforts. However, the ambivalence of "superwomen" combining employment and childcare "may not have the same salience in societies whose

cultural conception of motherhood embraces collective mothering, where responsibility for childcare is shared among family and community members" (Robinson, 2014, p. iii). This represents a strength of family functioning that offers opportunities for young mothers to explore alternative identities of womanhood, such as professional employee and postgraduate student.

On the other hand, the huge and often solitary responsibility of child-raising in the situation of resource-poor, female-headed households in marginalised circumstances stretches maternal practices like the arms of an octopus and may be experience as hard, stressful, victimised, or hectic (Adeagbo, 2019; Goodrum et al., 2019; Maisela & Ross, 2018; Mkhize & Msomi, 2016). Mothering interprets towards an oppressive and "stretched institution" because maternal practices entail an overload of responsibilities. This interpretation connects to the traditional male-defined institution of motherhood adhering to nurture, protection, and self-sacrifice (Walker, 1995); yet, adding on more responsibilities, especially the providing of the main income to the household. This motherhood institution alludes to the "intensive mothering" debate (Hays, 1996) where mothers are objects in relation to their children's needs. Critical psychology interprets it as child-centred and mother-blaming, where mothers are held responsible for their children's healthy development (Hollway, 2001).

Ongoing debates about how problematic constructions of masculinity and femininity are (re)produced and challenged in view of gender (in)equality in diverse family settings (Helman & Ratele, 2016) intersect closely with possible future hegemonies of motherhood. For instance, how men who take full-time care of children are interpreted in this context signifies the development of the institution of motherhood. Would this develop into accepted aspects of fathering and form part of the hegemony of masculinity, or would it become "men who mother" and, rather, form part of alternative motherhood? This paper suggests that motherhood is a core societal institution in transition, both within and outside of a patriarchal framework, "stretched", yet powerful, as "collective" mothering presents a source of resilience in family functioning.

**Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research and policy**
While this study could benefit from a more systematic literature search including a wider scope that could include more studies that potentially would feed into re-conceptualisations of mothering, or more specific exclusion criteria of design or type of participants for comparisons, future research would benefit from more empirical studies using mothers' experiences of mothering as the unit of analysis. Exploring what "good mothering" means for the people involved regardless of their kin connection, gender, and age, and finding means that mothering is viewed in subjective terms. Following this line of thought posed by feminist scholars helps us understand what is good for the children and others in the family and could contribute to tailored family policies.

Conceptual advancements would benefit from deeper analyses of mothering as culturally defined inside and outside a patriarchal institution. A family functioning approach (Knijn & Patel, 2018) could be useful for future white papers on family by connecting mothering to debates of care dynamics, involved fathering, and reciprocity across generations.

Future family research and policies could benefit from choosing a resiliency perspective, relating to debates on strengths as is done in the work of Isaacs and colleagues (2019), rather than working from a crisis angle. Policy developments could make use of an eclectic approach where maternal theory is linked to a socio-ecological model of multiple levels of influence within larger social systems (Sallis et al., 2008). People involved in maternal practice represent the core to which we could add unemployment, labour migration, grants, and other forces to the social, community, and societal levels of interventions.

**Conclusion**
In socioeconomically marginalised settings in South Africa, mothering reads across complex circumstances, like lone, absent, replaced, shared, marginalised, and disrupted, interpreted as "stretched but collective" given the overload of responsibilities that in this context often are shared within a family community. The domain of mothering integrates across several layers of theoretical insights where maternal practices (i) entitle to a broad set of people, (ii) combine, compete with and shape identities, (iii) represent agencies, and (iv) connects to new developments of a motherhood institution that illuminates the resources of this domain for better family functioning in this context.

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