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# The psychological impact on adult children who moved back home due to the financial consequences of COVID-19

**Danielle dos Reis**

School of Human and Community Development

School of Psychology, University of Witwatersrand

PSYC7015A

Student Number: 1057460

Supervisor: Maria Chiara Marchetti-Mercer

**A research paper submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of**

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**in the Faculty of Humanities,**

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# University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

## School of Human and Community Development

## SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

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26 June 2023

**Signature:** **Date**

# Acknowledgments

Most importantly, all glory and praise to my Heavenly Father for blessing me and granting me my prayers. You have been my Rock and Strength throughout this journey, which required me to press in and lean on You.

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on most countries across the globe. It also resulted in severe losses in various aspects of life such as work, school, and the family. Family life was particularly strongly affected by the lockdowns that were implemented to curb the spread of the virus. Many young adults returned to the parental home, experiencing a disruption in the family life cycle, because the decision to make this move delayed their transition to adulthood and parenthood.

The purpose of this research study was to explore the psychological impact on such young adults of returning to their parents' home because of the financial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Gauteng, South Africa. The study drew on Family Systems theories and the Family Life Cycle model to understand this phenomenon and its impact on South African families. The participants of the study included young South African adults between the ages of 23 and 30 years. The data gathered from semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings show that many young people moved back to their parents because of economic challenges experienced as a result of difficulties related to finding or retaining employment. Moreover, the study found that the return home had negative implications for participants' sense of independence, privacy, and mental health, despite increased emotional and financial support from parents. This influenced changes in their perceptions of adulthood, as well as a concurrent sense of stagnation and failure. The study also found that the return home of adult children led to an increase in interpersonal connectedness on the one hand, and to conflict between adult children and parents or guardians on the other, and it created a change in the parent-adult-child dynamic. The study adds to the emerging body of work on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family life and functioning.

# Contents

Declaration by Students ..... i

Acknowledgments ..... ii

Abstract ..... iii

Chapter 1: Introduction ..... 1

Background ..... 1

Research Aims ..... 4

Research Questions ..... 4

Rationale for the Study ..... 4

Outline of the study ..... 7

Chapter 2: Literature Review ..... 9

Introduction ..... 9

COVID-19 in the Context of South Africa ..... 9

The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health in South Africa ..... 12

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families ..... 17

South African Families ..... 17

International Studies on Families ..... 23

Experiences of Adult Children Moving Back Home to the Family ..... 25

Defining Adult Children ..... 25

Factors Influencing Adult Children to Return Home ..... 27

The Impact of Moving Back Home on Adult Children and Their Parents ..... 29

Confinement Within the Family ..... 33

The Exchange of Support in the Parent-Adult-Child Relationship ..... 36

Theoretical Perspectives on the Adult-Child-Parent Relationship ..... 39
Family Systems theories ..... 39
Family Life Cycle ..... 41
Conclusion ..... 45
Introduction ..... 46
Theoretical Framework ..... 46
Research Design ..... 47
Qualitative Approach ..... 48
Sample and Sampling ..... 49
Data Collection ..... 51
Background Information on the Participants ..... 53
Data Analysis ..... 57
Qualitative Rigour ..... 60
Credibility ..... 61
Transferability ..... 61
Dependability ..... 62
Conformability ..... 62
Ethical Considerations ..... 62
Self-reflexivity ..... 64
Conclusion ..... 67
Chapter 4: Findings ..... 68
Introduction ..... 68
The Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Employment ..... 68

Loss of Employment ..... 68
Diminished Work Role ..... 69
Being Unable to Find Employment ..... 70
Being Unable to Emigrate for Work or Educational Purposes ..... 71
The Economic Impact of Work Limitations ..... 73
Individual Experiences of Moving Back Home ..... 75
Loss of Independence ..... 75
Lack of Personal Space and Privacy ..... 77
Social Isolation and Loneliness ..... 78
Mental Health and Well-being ..... 79
Emotional and Financial Support ..... 83
The Changes in Familial Relationships ..... 84
Parents' Reaction to Their Adult Children Moving Back Home ..... 85
Increased Interpersonal Connection ..... 86
Changes in the Parent-Adult-Child Relationship ..... 87
Perceptions of Adulthood ..... 88
Original Perceptions of Adulthood ..... 88
Change in Personal Perception of Adulthood ..... 91
Feeling Like a Failure ..... 91
The Effect on the Family Cycle ..... 92
Disruption of the Family Life Cycle ..... 92
Stagnation in Personal Development ..... 93
Conclusion ..... 94

Chapter 5: Discussion ..... 95

Introduction ..... 95

The Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Employment ..... 96

Changes in Familial Relationships ..... 100

Individual Experiences Moving Back Home ..... 105

Conclusion ..... 111

Chapter 6: Conclusion ..... 114

Key Findings and Contribution ..... 114

Limitations ..... 115

Recommendations ..... 117

References ..... 119

Appendix A: Consent Form, Participant Information Sheet, Social media post ..... 153

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Project ..... 153

Participant Information Sheet ..... 154

Social media post ..... 156

Appendix B: Interview Questions ..... 157

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Background

In December 2019, the first cases of coronavirus disease 2019, also known as COVID-19, were reported in Wuhan City in China (Liu et al., 2020). The COVID-19 virus refers to an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, which causes a severe acute respiratory condition (WHO, 2023). The symptoms of a coronavirus infection become evident between two and 14 days after a person has come into contact with the virus and has been exposed to the virus. Symptoms of the first strain of COVID-19 ranged from mild to severe, including fever, coughing, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle aches, headaches, loss of taste and smell, and a sore throat (CDC, 2022). Following the breakout of COVID-19 in Wuhan, the virus spread around the world and was subsequently declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Moore, 2021). In response, many countries implemented a form of lockdown to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Onyeaka et al., 2021) and cope with the strain on health systems worldwide.

In South Africa, the first case of coronavirus infection was reported on 5 March 2020 (Schröder et al., 2021). The South African government moved swiftly to implement a national lockdown, which began on 26 March 2020 at midnight (Schröder et al., 2021). The lockdown revolved around a five-level alert system to combat the spread of COVID-19, and the level was adjusted based on the level of risk of transmission of the first and subsequent variants (RSA, 2022a). The alert levels were adjusted with the aim of progressively reducing restrictions (RSA, 2022a). When South Africa moved into Level 5 lockdown, severe restrictions were implemented (Moonasar et al., 2021). These included confining people to

their place of residence, except for those considered essential workers, such as police and medical personnel. People were only allowed to leave home to get access to or provide essential goods and services, such as essential groceries and medical care; social gatherings were prohibited; people were prohibited from travel between provinces, and all South African borders were closed, restricting travel to and from the country (RSA, 2022b). Overall, the South African lockdown restrictions were considered to be among the strictest in the world, in comparison to the restrictions in several other countries, and they had a considerable impact on the economy, communities, individuals, and families (Swart et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant disruptive historical event, as it derailed people's private and work lives, and, for many, their mental health and well-being (Tušl et al., 2021). By February 2023, South Africa had recorded a total of 4 055 656 positive cases since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Department of Health, 2023). The closure of non-essential businesses, schools, and higher education institutions altered the economy and face of education. Specifically, the national lockdown has had significant implications for the South African economy (Arndt et al., 2020). It resulted in significant financial difficulties due to the closure of businesses, and loss of employment, increasing the already high unemployment rate and the number of people living in poverty (Swart et al., 2022). Limiting the number of people allowed to attend funerals, prohibiting large gatherings, prohibiting people from attending cultural, religious, and social events, and the sale of alcohol and tobacco (RSA, 2023) changed how people interacted.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath has had significant effects on the mental health of South Africans. Several studies identified a decline in the mental health of South African citizens, specifically reduced levels of happiness (Greyling et al., 2021), and an increase in the number of people who reported feeling distressed (Msomi, 2022). A

decline in the mental health of South Africans was thus fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown, and uncertainty about the future (Gittings et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a profound impact on family functioning. Families' lives and daily routines were disrupted because of the restrictions which forced adults to work from home and children to learn from home. Students attending school or university online from home ultimately influenced the responsibilities and roles of everyone in the family (Fisher, Languilaire et al., 2020). However, some South African families experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as affecting their daily lives positively. Paradoxically, the lockdown tended to increase family time, but also sometimes family conflict; it improved communication or reduced contact with family; it improved financial management or increased financial strain, and, while people became more aware of physical hygiene, it worsened mental health challenges, because of social distancing and restricted travel (October et al., 2022).

One phenomenon reported in the COVID-19 pandemic is the fact that many young adults – what in this study are termed "adult children" – moved back to their parents' homes. Generally, there appears to be limited research exploring the impact of moving back home on adult children, with exception of some research looking at the economic crisis of 2008, when some adult children also moved back home, largely due to economic challenges. Most of the prior research on this topic was conducted in the United States of America (USA) and Europe. To address this gap, the research reported in this dissertation aimed to explore the psychological impact of moving back home on adult children during COVID-19 in South Africa. This was achieved by exploring the experience of adult children moving back to the parental home and the coping mechanisms they implemented during this time.

## Research Aims

The research study aimed to explore the psychological experiences and impact of moving back in with their parents on adult children in South Africa between the ages of 25 and 30 in response to the economic consequences of the nationwide lockdown implemented at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. It first explored the factors that contributed to adult children's moving back home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research study then explored their psychological experiences once they had returned to their parental home.

## Research Questions

This research focused on three research questions:

- What factors contributed to adult children's decision to return to the parental home following lockdown restrictions?
- How has the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences affected the psychological well-being of adult children?
- How did adult children cope with the psychological impact of moving back home because of the consequences of the lockdown?

## Rationale for the Study

The pandemic had a pronounced influence on families, individuals within families, and the practice of family and couples therapy (Fraenkel & Cho, 2020; Lebow, 2020). In addition, the individuals within these relationships battled to manage the emerging difficulties in mental health, including depression and anxiety, and conflict within these relationships (Fraenkel & Cho, 2020). COVID-19 caused larger systemic challenges for many families trying to navigate the stress of disease (or the risk of infection) and social isolation, as well as the broader economic and social issues that affect a family's finances,

employment, and livelihood (Lebow, 2020). In addition to the difficulty of dealing with the external impact of COVID-19, many family members had to move in together despite potential relational conflict (Fraenkel & Cho, 2020).

Rolland (2020) points out that many young adults moved back home because universities went online, because of the high unemployment rate among young adults, and for other financial reasons, such as a reduction in salary or wages. This decision may have had an impact on young adults' ability to establish their adulthood, delaying the transition to adulthood usually marked by traditional indicators that signal the transition to adulthood, because of cultural and structural changes in society (Swartz et al., 2011). Some studies have suggested that the transitional period to adulthood can occur between the ages of 18 and 34 years (see, for example, Furstenberg et al., 2004), but the transition may be coming later in this period, rather than earlier, because of the effects of the pandemic.

The added stress of the pandemic, financial difficulties and unemployment, and restrictions imposed by the government may have contributed to the development of tension among families (Rolland, 2020). Potential conflict was often aggravated by family members' conflicting beliefs and views without the possibility of physical distance (Rolland, 2020) and the restrictions on the normal activities that individuals participate in to ease their stress. Considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various aspects of family life, the current research study was specifically interested in the psychological impact on the adult child of moving back home in response to COVID-19.

The existing literature has tended to focus on young adults who moved back home in the past because of economic challenges in Europe and the USA (Caputo, 2019; Davis et al., 2016; Tosi & Grundy, 2018). Most international studies have investigated the impact of returning to the parental home on adult children (Burn & Szoeke, 2015; Caputo, 2020; Copp et al., 2017; Hartung & Sweeney, 1991; Hikichi et al., 2020; Sassler et al., 2008).

International studies have also investigated the impact of adult children returning to the parental home on parents' quality of life (Tosi & Grundy, 2018), mental health (Caputo, 2019), and satisfaction within their marriage (Davis et al., 2016). In South Africa, both before and after the pandemic, articles in the media have drawn attention to the phenomenon of adult children moving back in with their parents and the prevalence of young adults living with their parents well into their late twenties (De Klerk, 2016; Fourie, 2022; Nair, 2017), but there seems to be only a limited literature on the experience of adult children returning to the parental home that explores the personal experiences of young adults in South Africa, and there is little research on the experience in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consequently, the current research study was interested in exploring the phenomenon of young adults moving back and returning to the parental home during the pandemic to provide insight into the South African experience. The study was particularly interested in determining whether co-residence with parents and support from parents is a protective factor for adult children that shields them from the adverse economic effects (Bell et al., 2007) of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. This was achieved by exploring the experience of adult children's staying with their parents and the coping mechanisms the adult children implemented during this time.

The current study contributes to the growing literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on various aspects of life. In addition, the findings of this study may be of interest to psychologists and other practitioners, especially those whose field of expertise is family therapy. It provides insight into the experiences of adult children during the COVID-19 pandemic which may contribute an understanding of the long-term psychological effects of the pandemic on individuals and their functioning within the family, subsequently influencing functioning in family life.

**Outline of the study**

The thesis is presented in six chapters, and two appendices, as outlined below.

*Chapter 1: Introduction.*

The purpose of the introductory chapter is to orient the reader regarding the topic that is explored in this study, the aims, research questions, and the rationale for the study. The chapter further outlined the need for research exploring the psychological challenges young adults confronted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Chapter 2: Literature Review*

The literature review examines literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, the context it created, and its effect on mental health in South Africa. The chapter explores the impact of the pandemic on South African families, including a discussion of the nature of the concept of "family" in the South African environment. The phenomenon of the adult child returning home is contextualised by defining the adult child and exploring factors that contributed to the phenomenon of adult children's moving home, as well as the effect of adult children's moving back home on both the parents and adult children. The chapter considers confinement in the family and exchanges of support in the family life cycle. Family Systems theories and Family Life Cycle concepts that have contributed to an understanding of the psychological impact of returning home on the adult child and the rest of the family are discussed.

*Chapter 3: Methodology*

The methodology chapter provides an overview of the research design, methods and procedures that were chosen to address the research questions, including the sampling, data collection and data analysis implemented. The chapter discusses how the requirements to ensure trustworthiness and qualitative rigour were met in the study. It comments on ethical considerations, as well as on the positionality of the researcher in terms of self-reflexivity.

*Chapter 4: Findings*

The findings chapter presents the themes that were identified from a thematic analysis of the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure. The main themes identified in the chapter include the negative impact of COVID-19 on employability, individual experiences of moving back to the parental home, changes in familial relationships, and the effects of this decision on the family life cycle.

*Chapter 5: Discussion*

The discussion chapter interprets the findings from the perspective of the Family Systems theory and in relation to other relevant literature in an attempt to answer the research questions posed at the beginning of the study. The findings are discussed in terms of socioeconomic factors, family factors, and individual factors.

*Chapter 6: Conclusion*

The concluding chapter summarises the significant findings, identifies the limitations of the study and makes recommendations regarding future research.

*Appendices*

The appendices are the informed consent form and the information letter for participants, as well as the recruitment post on social media that participants were provided with prior to their participation in the study, and the interview schedule that was used to guide the data collection.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

Chapter 2 provides context on how COVID-19 unfolded in South Africa during the height of the pandemic, between March 2020 and January 2022. The effect of the pandemic on mental health across the globe and in South Africa is discussed, drawing on several studies. A key focus is the adult-child-parent relationship as reported in the literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring specifically South African families, but also considering international studies conducted on adult children's returning home. The adult child's returning back home is discussed by providing a definition of the adult child for the purposes of this study. Moreover, factors that influence adult children's return to the parental home, the impact of the adult child's returning home on the adult child and the parents, and confinement among the family during the COVID-19 pandemic are explored. Exchanges of support are outlined. Lastly, two relevant theories are looked at that provide a framework that enhances understanding of the phenomenon of adult children returning to live with their parents.

## COVID-19 in the Context of South Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic arose when the coronavirus spread across the globe (WHO, 2023). The coronavirus was first identified in December 2019, in Wuhan in China (Liu et al., 2020). It spread rapidly throughout the world, and the WHO classified the spread of the virus as a pandemic in January 2020 (WHO, 2023). As indicated in Chapter 1, the first case was identified in South Africa on 5 March 2020 (Schröder et al., 2021), and the virus spread quickly, prompting a rigorous lockdown. By 7 December 2022, the number of COVID-

positive cases in South Africa had reached 4,042,912, and 102,550 COVID-related deaths had been reported (Department of Health, 2022).

South Africa is known to be one of the most unequal countries in the world. Wealth is unequally distributed, and more than half of the country's population live in poverty. They lack access to basic services, such as electricity and water, and to clinics and hospitals, especially in remote areas; they also lack the financial means to travel to healthcare facilities (Devermont & Mukulu, 2020). Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the lockdown created severe economic hardship, a loss of livelihoods, and an increase in unemployment in the country (Statistics South Africa, 2022b).

COVID-19 is characterised as a highly contagious respiratory illness with prominent symptoms including a fever, difficulty breathing, a sore throat, and a cough (CDC, 2022; Department of Health, 2022). In March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a nationwide lockdown for an initial period of three weeks, starting at midnight on 26 March 2020 (Schröder et al., 2021), but this was extended throughout 2020 (Department of Health, 2022) with much uncertainty around when the nationwide lockdown would end. To curb the spread of COVID-19 and its variants, the South African government's COVID-19 system included five alert levels which were adjusted based on the level of the risk of transmission of the variants (RSA, 2022a). The alert levels were adjusted with the aim of progressively reducing the restrictions (RSA, 2022a). The national lockdown was implemented under the National State of Disaster, which enabled adjustments to the restrictions with immediate effect (RSA, 2022b). When South Africa moved into Level 5 Lockdown, severe restrictions were implemented that focused mainly on constraining the movements of individuals and goods (Moonasar et al., 2021). These restrictions included confining people to their homes, except if a person was considered an essential worker, or if someone required access to essential goods and services such as essential groceries and medical care; social gatherings

were prohibited; individuals were prohibited from travel between provinces, and all South African borders were closed (RSA, 2022b). South African citizens returning to the country (if they could do so at all) were required to isolate for 14 days upon arrival, and the same applied if anyone tested positive for COVID-19 (RSA, 2022b).

The lockdown restrictions also prohibited non-essential businesses from operating, including many retail stores and shopping malls, other than shops selling groceries and essentials, requiring businesses to remain closed, unless the work could be completed remotely (RSA, 2022b). Businesses that were considered non-essential remained closed for an extended period, sales of tobacco and alcohol were prohibited for longer, and South Africans were instructed to stay home and not leave their houses except to obtain essential goods (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020) and emergencies. As a result, many people experienced significant financial difficulties when businesses had to remain closed, and employees were laid off, which increased the unemployment rate and the number of people living in poverty (Swart et al., 2022). Overall, as indicated in Chapter 1, the South African lockdown restrictions were considered to be among the harshest in comparison to those of most other countries, and had a considerable impact on the economy, communities, individuals, and families (Swart et al., 2022).

Considering the economic backdrop of South Africa before the COVID-19 pandemic and the slow-down of the economy given the lockdown restrictions, Stiegler and Bouchard (2020) point out that poor communities struggled to adhere to the restriction of movement required, mainly because of their lack of food and financial means, despite food parcels and some financial relief. An assessment conducted by Stiegler and Bouchard (2020) to determine South Africa's response to the lockdown found that South Africans in urban areas were more easily able to abide by the lockdown rules than people in rural communities; people also feared becoming unemployed – not surprisingly, considering the unemployment

rate of 32,5% reported by Statistics South Africa (2021b). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa already had a high unemployment rate: 29% by the end of the third quarter of 2019 (Statistics South Africa, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic left even more South Africans without work. Although the number of unemployed people decreased by 447 000 in the first quarter of 2020, the unemployment rate reached 30% by the end of that quarter (Statistics South Africa, 2020a). Young South Africans in particular struggle to secure employment, and young adults were particularly vulnerable to the economic consequences of COVID-19 (Álvarez-Iglesias et al., 2021). A study by Ranchhod and Daniels (2020) found that the number of people employed between the ages of 18 and 59 years declined from 57% in February 2020 to 43% in April 2020. The World Bank (2021) assessed the employment rate among people aged 25 to 34 years and found that the unemployment rate was 51% in 2020. More recently, Statistics South Africa (2021b) reported an unemployment rate of 33% in 2021, where 45% of those who were unemployed were young South Africans between the ages of 15 and 34 years (Statistics South Africa, 2021b). Even the graduate unemployment rate among young South Africans aged 25 to 34 years was 16% (Statistics South Africa, 2021b). Subsequently, the rate of unemployment among graduates between the ages of 25 and 34 years increased by 7% in quarter 1 of 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2022a).

## The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health in South Africa

Prior to unpacking the effects of COVID-19 in South Africa and its impact on adult children's psychological well-being, it is vital to understand how mental health and well-being are defined, as this is an area of well-being which was deeply affected by the COVID-19 restrictions (Fisher, Tran et al., 2020; Serrano-Alarcón et al., 2022; WHO, 2022). Mental health is defined by the WHO as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and

fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community (WHO, 2014). Thus, mental health and well-being are considered to relate to a person's reaction to stressors and the person's ability to function in daily life activities in a healthy manner, within the person's community. Therefore, mental health is not based purely on a lack of psychiatric conditions. Mental health disorders are defined in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual Fifth Edition* (*DSM-5*) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as "clinically significant disturbances in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning" (APA, 2013).

Several South African studies have been conducted to investigate the prevalence of mental health among the South African population. Studies have found anxiety, mood, and substance use disorders to be the most prevalent among the South African population (Herman et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2019; Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021; South African Human Rights Commission, 2019). In addition, a study by Meyer et al. (2019) found anxiety-related disorders to be the most common mental health challenge.

Concerning mood disorders, Mungai and Bayat (2019) found a 21% prevalence of significant depressive symptoms in 2019 which had increased from an initial decline in 2010. They explained the increase in the prevalence of depressive symptoms related to socioeconomic difficulties experienced by lower-socioeconomic classes using the Social Causation and Social Drift theories to understand the correlation between socioeconomic challenges and the prevalence of mental health conditions (Mungai & Bayat, 2019). The Social Causation theory is based on the hypothesis that economic difficulties increase the risk of developing a mental health condition (Mossakowski, 2014). Economic difficulties refer to socioeconomic circumstances such as a lack of education, a person's employment category, and income. Economic difficulties also include the daily financial constraints that people

experience across different income levels, such as debt, overconsumption, problems with purchasing daily necessities such as food, clothes, and petrol, and ensuring the payment of monthly bills such as those for rent, home mortgages, and/or car payments (Laaksonen et al., 2009). Conversely, the Social Drift theory argues that when people experience mental health conditions because of economic challenges, such conditions may in turn impede their ability to achieve the economic and social status they desire, resulting in their shifting into a lower socioeconomic class (Mossakowski, 2014).

Considering the high prevalence of mental health challenges among the South African population prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, it can be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic may have significantly increased the prevalence of mental health difficulties. For example, it has been predicted that the manifestation of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety-related disorders would be worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nguse &Wassenaar, 2021). Already before the pandemic, the South African Human Rights Commission (2019) suggested that the incidence of depressive disorders may be higher when people experience high comorbidities of communicable diseases and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and other mental health disorders. Consequently, the prevalence of mental health disorders increased when COVID-19, as a communicable disease, caused a pandemic, leaving people with pre-existing conditions especially vulnerable to mental health difficulties.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown regulations have been reported to have contributed to increased mental health difficulties, as people experienced anxiety, depression, loneliness, stress and other conditions (Porter et al., 2021; Salari et al., 2020). In South Africa, a number of studies have investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health, specifically the onset of stress and anxiety, and mood disorders, in response to the economic, psychological, and social effects of the pandemic. For example, a study by

Swart et al. (2022) assessed the economic, psychological, and social factors that influenced the responsiveness of South Africans to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported concern that they or their families would be infected with COVID-19. The study also found that participants experienced feelings of anxiousness, anger, hopelessness, and isolation, and had difficulty sleeping at night (Swart et al., 2022). One study showed that a large portion of participants did not leave their homes for extended periods, and that others only left their homes to buy groceries and other necessities (Dukhi et al., 2021).

Another study investigated the mental health outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic on South Africans and reported significant experiences of anxiety, loneliness, and declining life satisfaction, suggesting that young South African adults experienced significant mental health difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pretorius & Padmanabhanunni, 2021). Lentoor and Maepa (2021) explored the experiences among young black female women.[1] Of their participants, 61,2% reported stress and anxiety, 39% reported financial stress, and 31,6% reported feeling anger, frustration, and sadness. Moreover, Hunt, Breet et al. (2021) found that depressed mood was significantly associated with unemployment.

In addition to these studies, a few articles also shed light on experiences around mental health by South Africans during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Mail & Guardian* reported that South Africans felt afraid of being infected by the COVID-19 virus, but were frustrated and bored by the lockdown restrictions (Davey, 2020). The *Global Citizen* reported on a survey conducted by Pharma Dynamics, which found that 56% of South Africans experienced emotional and psychological distress because of the experience of extraordinary stress triggers, exposure to and being infected with the COVID-19 virus, and concerns about the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mlaba, 2020).

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[1] In this study, the use of these "racial" labels is not intended to signify biological differences, or to essentialise particular groups, but reflects labels still used in South Africa by the ANC-led post-apartheid government, by Statistics South Africa and other official institutions.

Considering the positive and negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Greyling et al. (2021) conducted a study to assess the effect that lockdown had on individuals' levels of happiness, and the factors that determine happiness in South Africa. South Africa was chosen as an extreme country case because of the strict lockdown restrictions, within the context of declining well-being, including health, and economic decline, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Greyling et al., 2021). Their study found that the lockdown resulted in decreased levels of happiness among South Africans. Job uncertainty and restrictions on the purchase and consumption of alcohol and tobacco were negative factors that influenced happiness, in comparison to staying at home, which was identified by many as a positive factor related to happiness among South Africans (Greyling et al., 2021).

A study by Sapien Labs investigated the well-being of individuals in several countries, including South Africa. The study found that the number of distressed South Africans increased from 29% in 2020 to 36% in 2022 (Msomi, 2022). The increase in distressed individuals in South African may be a result of poor education and high unemployment rates in South African (Mukwevho, 2022). Furthermore, the experience of mental health distress was significantly impacted by unemployment and food insecurity (Hunt, Tomlinson et al., 2021). Adolescents and young adults who took part in one study reported feeling anxiety and depression in response to their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, as well as a sense of uncertainty concerning the future, especially concerning future employment (Gittings et al., 2021).

A survey administered by the University of Johannesburg and the Human Sciences Research Council (2020) reported that South Africans were "very concerned" about the impact of the lockdown regulations on the economy and their personal finances. The survey indicated that most of the participants were already unemployed before lockdown and many participants had also become unemployed as a result of the lockdown. Moreover, the survey

showed that most of the participants were depressed, scared, and stressed (Human Sciences Research Council, 2020).

A more recent study on South Africans' mood responses and capacity for coping during the pandemic revealed increased fatigue and tension, which may be consistent with the survey discussed above which highlighted people's experience of fear (Van Wijk & Majola, 2021). The South African lockdown restrictions were thus demonstrably a factor that contributed to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's mental health.

## The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families

The COVID-19 pandemic did not have only economic consequences – it also had an impact on the family system. Therefore, the structure and nature of South African families is briefly discussed to provide context for the study. Selected South African studies are considered, focusing on ones that highlight intergenerational living. Additionally, international studies generationally-based living arrangements prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic are reviewed. Lastly, studies on the effect of confinement on the family are presented.

### *South African Families*

In considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the family, it is vital to define what precisely a family is. The term can be understood in several different ways, depending on the culture and the context which in a family system exists. In South Africa, it is useful to define the family using both Western and African perspectives. A family in Western society is usually described as a nuclear family, which refers to a husband and wife living in a home with their children (Siqwana-Ndulo, 1998). By comparison, the family as a construct in African society includes family members outside of a traditional Western notion of a nuclear family. This perspective focuses on the collective, and includes grandparents,

aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, grandchildren, and so on (Siqwana-Ndulo, 1998). The nuclear family system is associated with Western societies are more likely to exist in South Africa's urban areas, while extended family systems tend to be associated more with rural societies that are homogenous (Amoateng et al., 2007).

Overall, the structure of South African families varies greatly. For example, white South African families, and many Indian families, assume a structure that is consistent with the nuclear family system, but many black African and Coloured families assume a structure that reflects the extended family system (Amoateng et al., 2007). Furthermore, South African family structures include female-headed homes, child-headed homes (where children are orphaned as a result of high mortality among parents from HIV/AIDS), conjugal pairs with their children, which may be more common among white South African families, often consisting of an average of four members, extended family systems that include non-relatives and intergenerational living arrangements, which may be more commonly experienced among black South African families (Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016). In this regard, Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba (2016) suggest that South African families are becoming more westernised because of several factors, including decreased fertility among couples and increased mortality because of HIV/AIDS.

The family structure may also influence parenting and child-rearing in the family, which is a vital consideration when considering the term "parent" in this study. Firstly, it is important to explore the fact that the word "parent" may be used differently, according to the context. For example, Persson (2019) investigated how the use of the word "parent" has evolved from referring to only a father, to referring to the father, mother, and/or any person responsible for the caregiving of another. Thus, she suggests that "parent" can be used as a description to describe a biological mother and father, and non-biological parents such as step-parents, adoptive parents, and any other person who assumes the responsibilities of a

biological parent (Persson, 2019). Secondly, in African families, those responsible for childrearing and parenting may include members of the extended family, who are perceived as a source of economic, emotional, psychological and social support to members of the family (Amos, 2013). Consequently, the responsibility of caregiving for children is assumed by both biological parents and the extended family to which a child belongs (Amos, 2013) suggesting that a feature of parenting in African families includes relatives' assuming a prominent role in providing caregiving and child-rearing for all children in the family (Hall, 2022). This is consistent with statistics that indicate that 19% of South African children do not live with either of their biological parents (Statistics South Africa, 2021a), because of parental absence due to various factors that may result in children's living permanently with extended family, as opposed to with their biological parents (Hall, 2022).

Therefore, for the purposes of the current study, the term "parental home" or "parents' home" is inclusive of the homes of both biological parents and members of the extended family who fulfil the responsibilities of biological parents such as an aunt and uncle.

In terms of modernisation theory, the family may undergo a change in the size of the household, shifting from an extended family structure to a nuclear family structure as societies modernise. Such changes have been attributed to economic circumstances (Amoateng et al., 2007). For example, the formation of white South African families, of Western or European descent was influenced by an industrial-capitalist civilisation that valued independence, living separately, and privacy (Burch, 1995). However, Burch (1995) acknowledges that the capacity to live separately depends on a certain level of income – a high income level provides more opportunities for living separately, especially in an economy that is growing and thriving (Burch, 1995).

Western families may also be more closely associated with individualistic cultures. By contrast, collectivist cultures value intergenerational living, with more than one

generation per household. Intergenerational living is a common feature among South African families (Cantillon et al., 2021) – indeed, Statistics South Africa (2019) indicated that before COVID-19, as many as 64,4% of the elderly African population, 51,4% of the elderly Coloured population, 29,3% of the elderly Indian and Asian population, and 9,6% of the elderly white population lived in homes consisting of extended families. Based on these figures, it is clear that intergenerational living occurs more among the black African and Coloured population. Additional statistics indicate that 48,4% of the elderly in the African population lived in a home with three or more generations. Furthermore, 40,3% of elderly in the Indian and Asian population lived in a home with two generations. Lastly, 49,4% of elderly in the white population lived in a home with an individual of a similar age, such as a spouse (Statistics South Africa, 2019). The contrasting figures depicted above can be understood by looking at Western and traditional African ideals. For example, nuclear families are the ideal construct only in terms of traditional Western cultures (Hall & Mokomane, 2018).

Living arrangements in South Africa can also be described as flexible because South Africans often migrate between a primary and secondary home. This migration is influenced by several factors. For example, it is common for parents to live in more urban centres away from their children in rural areas in order to pursue job opportunities. Children may live either with one parent or with neither of their parents (Hall & Mokomane, 2018). Children who live with one parent may also be cared for by other adult family members, who function as a caregiver of the child outside of the nuclear family (Hall & Mokomane, 2018).

Intergenerational living may also be more prominent when a crisis occurs, and if the family acts as a source of support (Posel & Casale, 2020). Therefore, it is important to consider intergenerational living in a South African context, which is of critical interest to this research. During the national lockdown in South Africa, “double-rootedness” was

demonstrated among adults who maintained an attachment to their parents or family home and returned to these homes during the initial national lockdown. The pattern, nature, and value of living arrangements were highlighted as a method to cope and implemented when individuals experienced a crisis (Posel & Casale, 2020). A study conducted by Posel and Casale (2020) on the pandemic and its effects found that 16% of South Africans aged 18 years or older moved to a different household, and that 70% of these moves took place at the end of March 2020, and that 51% of those who moved travelled between provinces to a different household just before the lockdown was implemented. Adults who moved to a different household during the lockdown included people who lost their employment, people who could work and attend school remotely, and migrant workers whose work was suspended during lockdown Level 5 (Posel & Casale, 2020).

The decision to move back home may also have been motivated by wanting to combat the experience of being alone during a global pandemic, particularly among young adults. Evidence in support of this argument was reported by Stiegler and Bouchard (2020), who found that South African individuals who were in lockdown with their families were happy with their living arrangements, in contrast to those who lived alone and described an increase in the experience of anxiety. However, those in rural areas may not have been as privileged. Naidu (2020) indicates that most members of South African society currently live in conditions of poverty, living in overcrowded homes, with their parents, grandparents, and children.

Another reason for the decision of adult children to return home may have also been the closure of universities and TVET colleges across South Africa (Whitelaw et al., 2020). A South African study among college and university students found that 40,1% of students returned home, 37,5% of students remained at home as usual, and 8,2% of students stayed with family or a relative (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020).

The impact of young adults' moving back home during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of that move on the family has been considered in a study by October et al. (2022). Their study took a qualitative approach to explore family experiences during the lockdown in South Africa. They found that the family unit was characterised by both negative and positive experiences during the lockdown restrictions. They identified six themes (October et al., 2022). One theme was the impact of the lockdown restrictions on family events and routines. Changes in family routines occurred because parents had to work from home and children had to attend school online or not at all, which allowed for increased family time. In some families, this helped to establish and develop stronger relationships and allowed family members to support each other. By contrast, other families experienced increased family time as straining relationships because of the persistent sharing of common environments within the home and increased conflict within the family (October et al., 2022). Communication and socialisation among families were positively and/or negatively affected by families' increased communication. Many stayed in touch using social media platforms such as WhatsApp groups, but others worked from home and isolated completely, drastically reducing their level of personal interaction (October et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the study found that the restrictions affected families financially. Many families were confronted with unemployment and the loss of a stable income, although some families indicated that the restrictions and working from home aided them in saving on travel costs and improving their financial management (October et al., 2022).

Lastly, the lockdown restrictions had an impact on families' psychological well-being; several participants experienced anxiety, depression, fear, and stress relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (October et al., 2022). Another South African study found a high prevalence of anxiety (27%) and depression (39%) among families (Adnan et al., 2021).

### *International Studies on Families*

International studies suggest a trend towards intergenerational living in the last decade as a result of the fact that adult children move back in with their parents. Over the last few years, this trend has accelerated in Europe and the USA as adult children return home to their parents (Caputo, 2019; Davis et al., 2016; Tosi & Grundy, 2018). A recent study conducted in the USA reported that 52% of young adults (defined as people aged 18 to 29 years) lived with their parents in 2020 (Yu, 2020), but adult children did not only return home because of the pandemic. In the United Kingdom, 55% of adults aged between 20 and 34 years were living with their parents between 2008 and 2017 as opposed to living separately (Yu, 2020).

The phenomenon of "boomerang kids" (adult children returning to the parental home) dates back further than the pandemic. The 1970s already saw adult children returning home (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). The main reasons for adult children deciding to move back home then included the need for financial support because of high unemployment rates, the increased cost of living, which made moving back home seem like an attractive way to economise, and the need for emotional support after a divorce or failed relationship (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). It seems clear that economic difficulties and a need for financial assistance encouraged many of these young adults to move back home. Hartung and Sweeney (1991) conducted interviews with adult children that supported the above two reasons for returning home. They interviewed adults between the ages of 22 and 35, with the average age at 27 (Hartung & Sweeney, 1991). Dey and Pierret (2014) consulted the US National Longitudinal Youth Survey of 1997 to assess the living arrangements of young adults born between 1980 and 1984. The survey found that more than half of the 90% of young adults who left their parents' home had returned home because of a lack of employment, insufficient wages, and other personal reasons (Dey & Pierret, 2014).

Since the beginning of 2020, the primary reason for "boomerang kids" to move back in with their parents is the economic hardships that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic (Fry et al., 2020). The ability of these "boomerang kids" to move back home during times of economic hardship is attributed to the financial stability and status offered by the parental family to help reduce the economic difficulties experiences by the "boomerang kids" aged between 18 and 29 years who may be unemployed, or experienced a reduction in their income (Hess, 2022).

An important life transition for young adults in Western cultures is to establish their own homes and live independently of their parents. The findings of the above studies contradict societal expectations that the transition to adulthood should occur at a relatively early age. In the 1960s and 1970s, adult children were expected to leave home early in adulthood and not to return home (Hartung & Sweeney, 1991). Hartung and Sweeney (1991) point out that adult children who did return home were thought to be violating a societal norm at the time. It is important to consider how expectations have changed over the years – today, young adults are reaching various life stages at a much later age than their parents did. In light of the delay in young adults' reaching "milestones" such as marriage and parenthood, Hartung and Sweeney (1991) interpret the rise of adult children returning home as an indication that adulthood is still characterised by the achievement of a certain level of formal education and the ability to live independently. However, many adult children are unable to obtain independence and achieve a fairly good lifestyle for themselves; in addition, the parental residence is a preference among several ethnic groups (Hartung & Sweeney, 1991). Adult children's difficulty in developing the attributes required for adulthood (Hartung & Sweeney, 1991) could underlie all the factors that contribute to the phenomenon of adult children moving back home.

In the USA, young adults experience moving back home as a positive and/or a negative experience. Some reported perceived moving back home as positive, because their family home provided stability during a period of uncertainty, helped these young adults to save money on rent, and aided them in establishing a different dynamic with their parents, allowing them to redefine their relationships with their parents as adults (Venutolo-Mantovani, 2021). By contrast, others experienced moving back home as challenging, because they experienced embarrassment and shame about moving back in with their parents and were confronted with difficulties in navigating remote workspaces from home, resulting in a sense of frustration (Venutolo-Mantovani, 2021).

## Experiences of Adult Children Moving Back Home to the Family

This section and its subsections explore the literature on the experiences of adult children moving back in with their parents. In this section, the term adult child is also revisited and defined to establish a context for an understanding of the literature reviewed. Next, the general reasons for moving back home among adult children are discussed and compared to factors that influenced adult children to move home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then the effect of adult children returning home on the family system is highlighted by exploring the impact of returning home on adult children and their parents. Lastly, the exchange of support between parents and their adult children is discussed.

### *Defining Adult Children*

It is difficult to define adult children, because various criteria may be applied. For example, adult children are often defined by factors such as age, their transition from life in the parental home to independence, job security, or financial independence. According to

South Africa's *Youth Policy and National Youth Commission Act, 19 of 1996* (RSA, 1996),[2] a youth can be described as a person between the ages of 14 to 35 years (Lujabe, 2018). However, this definition may pose some confusion, as the age of "youth" overlaps the age of a legal minor under South African law, which is a person under the age of 18 years (Ntshingila, 2020).

The adult child as described by Copp et al. (2017) is a person with the ability to rely on him- or herself, mainly in terms of being financially independent. However, adulthood cannot be defined only by an individual's ability to be self-reliant because the person is financially dependent only on him- or herself and not on the person's parents.

If neither age nor financial independence alone is enough to define the adult child, it may be more useful to characterise adulthood in terms of the parent-adult-child relationship. Bozhenko (2011) suggests some characteristics that may be used to describe the parent-adult-child relationship and changes that occur within the relationship. Adult children begin to build their own life and become an individual outside of their relationship with their parents, which leads to geographical changes, moving out of the home, emotional changes, and maintaining emotional independence (Bozhenko, 2011). Once separation has occurred, changes are evident in how parents and adult children communicate with each other, including the frequency and quality of communication; and changes in the personal attributes parents and adult children maintain as individuals, including their perceptions of their roles, how their roles have changed and their individuality (Bozhenko, 2011).

Ward (2008) describes the relationship between a parent and an adult child by identifying important aspects that these relationships provide to all those concerned. Ward (2008) argues that family relationships are paramount in acting as a barrier between a person

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[2] Repealed by the *National Youth Development Agency Act, 54 of 2008* (RSA, 2008).

and any external stressors. In addition, parents provide their children with a geographical location (the family home), and a social bond that maintains both the parent's and child's needs. Therefore, this relationship is multidirectional, as the well-being of adult children can affect their parents and the same is true for parents and children (Ward, 2008). Although the parent-adult-child relationship can be positive, it can also be negative, making these relationships ambiguous. For example, the parent-adult-child relationship can be a source of both unity and strife, both independence and dependence (Ward, 2008).

An additional consideration may be to define adulthood according to different categories within adulthood. For example, emerging adulthood is characterised as usually occurring between the ages of 18 and 25, and it involves a sense of freedom from specific social roles and expectations associated with the roles and responsibilities of adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, individuals in the emerging adulthood phase have the autonomy to experiment with different paths in life before committing to a specific path concerning their occupation, romantic relationships, and their beliefs and values (Arnett, 2000).

In light of these views in defining the adult child, for the purposes of this research, the adult child refers to an individual who is over the age of 18, and who has financial autonomy.

### *Factors Influencing Adult Children to Return Home*

The economic factors contributing to adult children moving back home now seem similar to those of 20 years ago. The economic difficulties that result in adult children moving back home are related to high unemployment rates, a lack of employment opportunities, and financial challenges (Caputo, 2019). Economic challenges are experienced in societies where the cost of living is high, making it challenging for young adults to establish an independent living if they cannot find employment to cement a solid financial basis (Burn & Szoeke, 2015). A lack of a solid financial basis was the most prevalent reason

for adult children from low socioeconomic groups to move back in with their parents around the time of the global financial crisis of 2008 (Sassler et al., 2008). Therefore, adults between the ages of 18 to 29 often move back home to overcome their economic difficulties, increased living expenses (especially for housing), and because they delay marriage (Glick & Lin, 1986, as cited by Hartung & Sweeney, 1991).

In addition to the economic challenges that forced adult children to move back home to their parents prior to the pandemic, other reasons include the end of intimate relationships, salary cuts, and adult children's personal challenges with their health and well-being (Tosi & Grundy, 2018). However, it is important to consider how times have changed and how previous generations of parents were thrust into adulthood at an earlier age than most millennials. Copp et al. (2017) considers different reasons for adult children leaving their parent's homes in different regions. In the past, adult children would leave their parents' homes in order to get married and start their own families, in contrast to adult children since the 1980s, who move out of their parent's homes primarily for educational and work opportunities (Buck & Scott, 1993; Furstenberg, 2000; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999, as cited by Copp et al., 2017).

Burn and Szoeke (2015) discuss the many advantages adult children may experience when living with their parents. The main advantage is financial support. Additional advantages include the use of resources available at home, with mothers doing domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning for their adult children (Hartung & Sweeney, 1991), and social and emotional support (Burn & Szoeke, 2015). Although there are advantages to moving back home, Burn and Szoeke (2015) explain that adult children who live at home or who have moved back home may find it challenging to maintain their adult status and self-image, and to transition from a parent-child relationship to a parent-adult child relationship (Burn & Szoeke, 2015). This may be especially difficult for adult children who have

previously established their independence, but have to move back home (Burn & Szoeke, 2015).

In South Africa, COVID-19 brought with it various economic difficulties, as many people were retrenched or lost their jobs because businesses closed down (Statistics South Africa, 2020d). The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic can be compared to those of the economic recession of 2008 and 2009, which saw a rise in young adults moving back home between 2007 and 2009 (Dey & Pierret, 2014). Dey and Pierret (2014) explain that young adults can succeed at establishing their own homes if they receive a good salary to help sustain them. However, during COVID -19, it was difficult for many young adults to maintain independent homes, especially in South Africa, where 25% of employees experienced a reduction in their salaries during the nationwide lockdown (Statistics South Africa, 2020b). In response, 38% of those South Africans whose salaries were reduced during the lockdown resorted to cutting down on expenses (where possible) and reduced their spending (Statistics South Africa, 2020d). For young adults, cutting down on expenses and spending could mean choosing to move back home, especially since 38% of those with reduced salaries coped by relying on their families (Statistics South Africa, 2020b).

Another important consideration is that some young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 years are enrolled in tertiary education and may use the parental home as a transitional space in South Africa.

### *The Impact of Moving Back Home on Adult Children and Their Parents*

When adult children choose to move back home, this does not come without challenges. The decision can affect their well-being. Firstly, adult children may find it challenging to assert their adulthood when they move back home (Sassler et al., 2008). Parents may continue to regard them as children, which may lead to a regression to childhood

patterns of interaction between the adult child and the parents (Sassler et al., 2008). Parents' perceptions of their adult children as still young children may be explained by the difficulty in differentiating the roles between adult children and parents, compared to when those who are now adults were young, which can cause conflict between adult children and parents (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). This situation may make it difficult for adult children to form new adult relationships with their parents (Sassler et al., 2008).

Studies on the impact on adult children of co-residing with their parents show that many adult children experience depressive symptoms that can be attributed to their personal development being restricted, if moving back home re-establishes the behaviours and roles from their youth, in other words, regression from being an adult to feeling like a child at home (Burn & Szoeke, 2015). The adult child's return home may cause anxiety within the family system, manifesting through symptoms that cause dysfunction in individuals because of the difficulty with differentiation of the self (Bowen, 1978).

Adult children who moved back home reported that their parents interfered with their ability to make decisions independently, as their parents tried to weigh in on decisions regarding their professions and relationships (Sassler et al., 2008). Adult children experienced this as parents trying to exert their control over their children's decisions and implementing the same kind of behavioural limits that adult children would have been subjected to as children, for example, curfews, and control over their spending (Sassler et al., 2008), which adult children perceived as a loss of freedom and independence (Sassler et al., 2008). In interviews conducted by Hartung and Sweeney (1991), adult children also commented that when they moved home, the dynamics of their relationships with their parents changed. They were still perceived as younger children, and their behaviours were controlled and monitored by their parents (Hartung & Sweeney, 1991).

To assess adult children's mental health and their experience of co-residence with parents prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Caputo (2020) investigated whether there was an association between adult children moving back home and depressive symptoms, controlling for other factors that could influence depressive symptoms, especially additional roles that adults fulfil, such as working towards graduation and employment. The sample included two waves of adult children when they were aged 18 to 26 and 24 to 32. Caputo (2020) found that there was an increase in depressive symptoms among adult children who had moved back home when no other factors contributed to the depressive symptoms.

Copp et al. (2017) examined the association between the reason reported by adult children for moving back home to live with their parents and their experiencing depressive symptoms. The sample included 891 emerging adults who had moved back home, lived independently, or had never moved out from their parent's home. Copp et al. (2017) discovered an increase in depressive symptoms among adults who moved home because of unemployment.

Hikichi et al. (2020) used the Hong Kong Family Cohort Survey to recruit young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 years to examine the mental well-being of adult children who co-resided with their parents between 2009 and 2011. The study attracted 3612 participants. Results differed, depending on the role the young adult maintained in the household. Young adults who took on the role of the head of the household reported few depressive symptoms and good mental health (Hikichi et al., 2020). By contrast, young adults who were not the head of the household experienced more depressive symptoms and poor mental health, mainly because of conflict between parents and adult children regarding roles and responsibilities in the household (Hikichi et al., 2020).

The return of adult children to the parental home also affects their parents and various aspects of parental life. The decision of adult children to move back home to their parents is

met with some favourable and some unfavourable reactions from parents, primarily because of concern about the possible impact of adult children's return on their parents. This impact on parents has been examined in terms of various aspects, such as the parents' quality of life (Tosi & Grundy, 2018), the parents' mental health (Caputo, 2019), and their marital satisfaction (Davis et al., 2016). Caputo (2019) found that the impact on the parents of adult children's move back home may depend on the initial factors that induce adult children to return. Some of these factors may help to moderate parents' reactions to their adult children's move back home.

Some parents may be disappointed when their adult children return to live with their parents again (Caputo, 2020). They may express negative reactions because adult children's move back home is an indication to them that an adult child has failed to establish him- or herself as an adult, and they fear the impact on the parents' quality of life (Tosi & Grundy, 2018). Parents may also be concerned about the growing dependence of adult children on their parents for support, especially in terms of financial resources (Caputo, 2019).

Despite the negative consequences for parents when their adult children move back home, Caputo (2019) and Tosi and Grundy (2018) emphasise that there are also positive aspects that can improve the parents' quality of life if their adult children move back home. Some adult children may provide financial and social support, and contribute to the household expenses, which may help reduce parents' financial distress.

Therefore, the parents' reaction to their adult children moving back home appears to depend on the perceived consequences that this decision has on the parents' quality of life. Tosi and Grundy (2018) noted that parents in northern Europe experienced a decrease in their quality of life when their adult children moved back home, because these parents valued individualism. However, parents in southern and eastern parts of Europe did not report a decrease in the quality of life when their adult children moved back home, displaying their

sense of the value of family and acceptance of the idea of dependence on family for support and help (Tosi & Grundy, 2018). Thus, the impact on parents' quality of life when adult children moved back home is associated with the different family and individual values among different cultural groups across Europe.

The decision of adult children to move back home may have a negative impact on their parent's mental health. Caputo (2019) found that parents whose adult children moved back in with them expressed increased depressive episodes, compared to no increase in depressive episodes among parents whose adult children did not live with them.

Adult children moving back home may affect the parents' marital satisfaction. Davis et al. (2016) investigated the impact of adult childrens' moving back home on their parents' marital relationship in 2008, compared to 2013. The study found that adult children moving in with their parents affected the quality of their parents' marital relationship, in 2008. By contrast, they noted no association in 2013 between adult children moving back home and the quality of the parents' marriage (Davis et al., 2016). It is possible that parents became more accepting over time of their adult children moving back home in view of the continued economic challenges since 2008.

### *Confinement Within the Family*

The lockdown regulations under COVID-19 were implemented to reduce the transmission of the virus by restricting people's movement. People were required to stay confined at home with their families. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines confinement as "the state of being confined" which means to be restricted to a specific place (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This differs from quarantine, which required individuals to stay home if they had been exposed to anyone who had tested positive for COVID-19 (CDC, 2020).

Several studies have been conducted to assess the experience of confinement on families in South Africa and abroad. For example, the effects of confinement were assessed among the Spanish population by Ayuso et al. (2020). They took into consideration that the Spanish interacted frequently with the family prior to COVID-19, given a tendency to intergenerational proximity in living arrangements, particularly by living in the same or similar residential areas. Spanish families may be considered close-knit and aim to meet the family's needs by providing emotional support, financial support, and caregiving of children, grandchildren, and elderly members of the family (Ayuso et al., 2020). The study assessed the impact of confinement on the emotional well-being of families, the family relationships within and outside the home, and the use of technology during confinement. The study revealed that Spanish families experienced an increase in stress levels because of economic and employment uncertainties, although most of the participants perceived confinement to be a good thing and believed that confinement may contribute to increasing solidarity and support (Ayuso et al., 2020). Participants younger than 24 years considered confinement to strengthen family relationships within the home, in contrast to participants aged 25 to 34 years, who perceived confinement negatively because of the difficulties of establishing their own lives, including their professional careers, romantic relationships and family (Ayuso et al., 2020).

Hervalejo et al. (2020) looked at families' experiences of confinement in Spain during the COVID-19 pandemic by exploring the experiences of counsellors who provided psychological support to people who called in on various helplines dedicated to helping people manage distress. The study found that the main reasons for calls were a need for support with challenges that were worsened by COVID-19 and confinement. This included support in dealing with psychological distress, isolation and loneliness, the loss of loved ones to COVID-19, intimate partner conflict, family conflict, work, and economic uncertainty, and

concerns about the well-being of family members (Hervalejo et al., 2020). Interestingly, in contrast to the study conducted by Ayuso et al. (2020), Hervalejo et al. (2020) noted that family-related challenges included a lack of emotional support, limited contact with families because of confinement or concern about infecting family members, caring for sick family members who contracted COVID-19, and not being able to receive family support during challenging situations that occurred as a result of COVID-19 because of the restriction on movement and gatherings. In response to the experiences of callers, several counsellors reported the experience of symptoms relating to anxiety and isolation (Hervalejo et al., 2020).

In South Africa, Mahlangu et al. (2022) conducted telephonic interviews with South Africans over the age of 18 years, living with a partner and children during the COVID-19 lockdown. They found that confinement during lockdown initially aided in strengthening the family bond between spouses and parents and their children (Mahlangu et al., 2022). However, participants reported that they also experienced increased stress because of restrictions on their movements, remote work, job losses, reduced earnings, worry about the future, and concerns about their ability to meet family needs (Mahlangu et al., 2022).

Similarly, Duby (2022) reported that young South African women experienced tension, stress and frustration, and difficult family relationships while confined in the family home. Another study investigated parenting challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown – parents reported experiencing stress, irritability, hopelessness, and withdrawal, as well as increased tension in the home (Naicker & Richter, 2022). Wegner et al. (2022) considered the experience of leisure among young adults aged 18 to 32 years during confinement in lockdown Levels 4 and 5. The study found that young adults perceived confinement as disruptive and restricting, and as limiting their social engagement, resulting in a loss of autonomy (Wegner et al., 2022). The study reported that confinement led participants to experience demotivation, desperation, frustration, isolation, loneliness, and vulnerability, all

of which had an impact on the mental health of young adults (Wegner et al., 2022). The studies reviewed above, show that confinement affected the family system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *The Exchange of Support in the Parent-Adult-Child Relationship*

The parent-child relationship is considered one of the most influential relationships in an individual's life, affecting several aspects of life, from genetics to cognition, health, behaviour and engagement in social settings, and emotional experiences (Popov & Ilesanmi, 2015). However, across life stages, the parent-child relationship takes on different forms. During childhood and adolescence, children begin to explore autonomy and individuation, requiring parents' role to shift from caregiver to facilitator (Trommsdorff, 2006). As children become young adults, the parent-child relationship undergoes change which becomes evident in the establishment of boundaries in the relationship, the increased independence of adult children, and interdependency between the parent and the adult child (Trommsdorff, 2006).

The relationship between parents and adult children may also be characterised by the exchange of support between them (Gilligan et al., 2020). As the relationship changes, the direction of reciprocation and provision of care and support may also change, with adult children providing support, including instrumental and financial support, and parents receiving the support (Merz et al., 2009). Merz et al. (2009) found that the impact of providing and receiving support between adults and their parents, and vice versa, on their well-being depends on the quality of the parent-adult-child relationship, which determines positive or negative effects on adults and their parent(s). Consequently, the direction of support, both emotionally and financially, may depend on the adult child's age, which may also affect the quality of the relationship, based on the level of contact with parents, which may result in conflict (Merz et al., 2008).

Evandrou et al. (2018) found that the support adult children receive includes instrumental support (such as accommodation, helping with tasks at home), and financial support, in comparison to emotional support. As adult children age into middle life, they tend to provide instrumental support for their parents, but adult children's support for their parents did not depend on whether their parents supported them (Evandrou et al., 2018). Parents in mid-life may have to provide care and support for their elderly parents and a dependent child, leaving them to fulfil the role of a "sandwich generation." Parents may also fall into the category of "sandwich generation" when their adult children have not established independence or have become part of the "pivot generation" who depend on their parents for care and support (Grundy & Henretta, 2006). Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1994), and Berthound and Gershuny (2000, as cited by Grundy & Henretta, 2006) attribute the formation of the "pivot generation" to economic challenges that contribute to a delay in establishing financial and property independence, to the need for further education and qualifications for job security, and to difficulty in establishing relationships to start a family with, either because of relational difficulties or divorce. A critical question asked by Grundy and Henretta (2006) is whether mid-life adults' likelihood of supporting their adult children reduces the likelihood of their supporting their elderly parents. Grundy and Henretta (2006) conducted a study among mid-life women to answer the abovementioned question. They found that mid-life women who provide instrumental support and care for one or more adult children were likely also to provide instrumental care and support for their elderly parents, which supported the hypothesis of family solidarity (Grundy & Henretta, 2006).

The hypothesis of family solidarity attempts to explain patterns of solidarity between parents and their adult children. It highlights six elements required for solidarity, namely contact; emotional attachment; agreement of attitudes, beliefs, and values; sharing resources; responsibility to roles and obligations within the family; and the structure of the family

(Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). A theory which is critical of the solidarity perspective is the intergenerational ambivalence theory, which also hopes to explain the relationship between parents and their adult children. Luescher and Pillemer (1998) define intergeneration ambivalence as contradictions that cannot be resolved between parents and their adult children on two levels, namely social structure inconsistencies of norms and roles, and subjective inconsistencies between different ways of thinking, emotional experiences, and motivation. Therefore, the intergeneration ambivalence approach posits that the relationship between parents and their adult children cannot be considered only a positive experience, but may fluctuate between positive and negative experiences, and particularly between solidarity and conflict or distress (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the parent-adult-child relationship's patterns in the exchange of support have undergone changes, including the following (Gilligan et al., 2020):

- There was limited contact and support between parents and adult children who were not co-residents, because lockdown restrictions prohibited the movement of people during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The dynamic of relationships that were characterised as cohesive, or as tense, based on the extent to which parents and adult children shared beliefs and values, and this contributed to changes in social support.
- Technology helped families to stay connected through regular communication using various social media platforms, and to maintain family relationships.
- Parents and adult children often co-resided for various types of support during the pandemic.

## Theoretical Perspectives on the Adult-Child-Parent Relationship

This section offers an overview of the theories that can be applied to explain interactions between family members, specifically in the adult child-parent relationship. First, the family system is addressed by looking at definitions that underlie Family Systems theories. Then, the Family Life Cycle theory is explained, including the stages of the life cycle, with the emphasis on the launching stage. A critical perspective of these theories is also presented. These two theories are used in conjunction with one another in the current study as the theoretical framework to explain the impact of moving back home on adult children.

### *Family Systems theories*

Family systems form part of the wider framework of Systems Theory, but should not be confused with general systems (Bowen, 1976). Systems Theory is concerned with the connection between elements, as opposed to focusing on individual elements in isolation (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2000) explain that family systems imply "organisation" and "wholeness", and that family systems are made up of components (smaller parts that relate to other parts). Therefore, the systems are arranged around the relationships between the parts (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). It is important to consider that a system cannot be understood by its individual parts, but should rather be looked at in its entirety. Therefore, organisation and wholeness are important elements of the family structure. This structure can be arranged according to the different roles that form the family unit. The family structure may include a husband and wife who share equal power and responsibility in their relationship.

Bowen (1976) defines Family Systems Theory as focusing on the functioning of the relationships of people. According to this theory, members of a family depend on one another

to meet basic needs and intangible needs such as support and security (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Families can be seen as systems that are continuous, and arranged as a whole, including individuals whose constant interactions are influenced by their relationships. Therefore, elements within the family influence change in each other and can support or negatively affect the system (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000).

Bowen's Family Systems theory centres on the role of anxiety that is considered generational, and on what influences the development and management of anxiety and impacts the individual's functioning within the family system (Hargrove, 2009). Bowen's Family System theory proposes eight constructs, including the nuclear family's emotional system, differentiation of self, triangulation, emotional cutoff, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and emotional process (Hargrove, 2009). For the purposes of the current study, two of Bowen's constructs are highlighted, namely differentiation of self and triangulation.

The first concept, differentiation of self, refers to an individual's ability to function in response to emotional distress. It refers to a person's ability simultaneously to maintain emotional contact with others and to maintain autonomy in the person's own emotional functioning, allowing the person to think rationally about a situation without emotional pressure (Bohlander, 1995). Some people are able to think rationally during times of distress, whereas others' thinking may be clouded by intense emotions. Such responses can be explained as lying along a spectrum. If someone operates at the lower end of the spectrum, the person is unable to separate feelings and emotions, allowing emotions to take control in times of distress (Bowen, 1976). The result is an inability to adapt and the likelihood of inflexibility, causing dysfunction. People who operate at the higher end of the spectrum are able to differentiate between their feelings and thoughts, and to apply logical thought in times of distress (Bowen, 1976). Therefore, these people are adaptable and flexible.

The second concept, triangulation, refers to an arrangement of relationships between three individuals (Bowen, 1976). Triangulation is evident when anxiety occurs between two individuals in a dyadic relationship (Bowen, 1976), and a third person is involved. Brown (1999) explains that the third party usually sides with one of the other two individuals, but triangulation can also involve an activity that is used to relieve stress between two individuals. For example, a father and an adult child may experience conflict because of the financial burden imposed by the need to support the adult child; the mother may then be the third party who supports one of the two, leaving the party without external support outcast.

The third concept is the nuclear family environment, which involves the emotional functioning of a family in one generation, but that can be influenced by previous generations and can influence generations to come (Bowen, 1976).

According to Bowen (1976), Family Systems theory includes two aspects that are subject to change, namely the extent of anxiety an individual experiences and the incorporation of self. A person who experiences anxiety can address the anxiety within by using internal mechanisms to cope with the anxiety and adapt. However, if the anxiety is severe and internal mechanisms are inadequate, internal conflict can arise, as well as conflict in personal relationships (Bowen, 1976). Consequently, if parents experience anxiety as a result of the added financial stress of adult children's moving back home, conflict can arise between the parents, or between one of the parents and the adult child, causing dysfunction in the family system or the self.

### *Family Life Cycle*

The second theory relevant to this study is the Family Life Cycle theory. This theory focuses on a circular pattern that explains the changes that families experience over time. The theory is based on the premise that families move from one life stage to another in a cycle

(McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). An important aspect of the Family Life Cycle model is that tension is experienced between an individual and the family in a system (Poon & Bader, 2014).

The Family Life Cycle can also be understood through the lens of the developmental cycle, which proposes that the changes that occur at each life stage require the family to meet certain milestones before the family can move on to the next stage (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). For example, an important milestone for young adults is to move out of their family home to live independently in their own space (Caputo, 2020). If this milestone is not completed when an adult child does not leave home, or is reversed when an adult child moves back home, this will disrupt the launching stage, as well as the parents' ability to move on to retirement, especially if they have to provide financial support for an adult child.

There are various Family Life Cycle models. The family life cycle was first described by Evelyn Duvall in 1956 (as cited in Poon & Bader, 2014). The family life cycle as described by Duvall includes eight stages (as cited by Poon & Bader, 2014, p. 9):

1) Stage 1: Married couples (no children)
2) Stage 2: Childbearing families
3) Stage 3: Families with children in preschool
4) Stage 4: Families with children of school age
5) Stage 5: Families with teenagers
6) Stage 6: Families with children who are launching (children leaving home)
7) Stage 7: Middle-aged parents (empty nest)
8) Stage 8: Ageing parents (retirement)

The Family Life Cycle theory can describe and explain the different stages a family goes through, but the progression through this cycle may differ between families and may be influenced by the family's culture, traditions, and the rituals that signify the change from one

life stage to another (McGoldrick, 1992). An important stage that Poon and Bader (2014) have included in the family life cycle is “leaving home” and the “unattached adult” which requires the adult child and the parent to separate, allowing the adult child to establish independence from the parents (Poon & Bader, 2014, pp. 10 & 11). This additional stage requires the family to progress through the launching stage of the family life cycle.

Therefore, the research discussed in this thesis focused on the launching stage of the Family Life Cycle stage. The launching stage is understood as the family preparing for the young adult to move into adulthood (McGoldrick, 1992). This is a critical stage, because it requires the family to support the adult child and maintain the parental home as a supportive base (Wulaningsih & Krisnatuti, 2019). Moreover, the launching stage is accompanied by various levels of anxiety; the quality of interaction within the family influences whether the family experiences harmony or disharmony during the launching stage (Wulaningsih & Krisnaturi, 2019). However, this is not fixed across cultures and families. Instead, how families prepare for young adult children to move into adulthood will vary across ethnic groups, depending on whether the family values individualism or collectivism (McGoldrick, 1992).

In considering the changing world in terms of the cultural and social contexts in which people live today, emerging adulthood has become increasingly prominent as a life stage, and is expected to occur, despite changes in the context, in society, and a situation in which the achievement of some milestones is often put on hold for later in adulthood, for example, marriage (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2004, as cited in Arnett, 2016) highlights five factors of emerging adulthood. These factors are self-focus, feeling “in between”, identity exploration, instability, and possibilities (Arnett, 2004, as cited in Arnett, 2016). Emerging adulthood is also characterised by constant change, reflected in the experimental freedom young adults have to explore different paths in this stage.

Continuous changes are evident in patterns of living arrangements and educational opportunities. The patterns observed concerning living arrangements include young adults' moving out of the parental home to go to university. Nevertheless, they still regard the parental home as their primary home to return to during holidays or at the end of specific phases, such as completing their university education. Young adults also move out of the parental home to pursue career opportunities, or to live with a romantic partner, but some remain home until marriage (Arnett, 2000). Furthermore, some no longer follow traditional paths in attaining tertiary education – they may extend their education into postgraduate studies, or seek employment opportunities between committing to their further education (Arnett, 2000).

Emerging adulthood is unlike adolescence and adulthood, because of the differences between these stages regarding occupation, romantic connections, and the beliefs and values held (Arnett, 2000). For example, adolescence is classified by the beginning and end of puberty and the attainment of physical maturity, whereas emerging adults no longer experience puberty, because they have reached physical maturity (Arnett, 2000). Age is no longer considered a significant distinguishing factor in determining the difference between adolescence, emerging adulthood, and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Arnett and Mitra (2018) led a study in the United States to compare the factors of emerging adulthood in adults of different age cohorts. Although emerging factors such as instability, identity exploration, and possibilities were most evident among emerging adults, these elements were also apparent among older age cohorts (Arnett & Mitra, 2018). Emerging adulthood is evident in different cultures, but it has been suggested that it is experienced differently among people from different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2004, as cited in Arnett, 2016).

Although the Family Life Cycle theory is widely applied to explain how families progress through different life stages, the theory has met with some criticism. Falicov (2016) points out that the life cycle does not account for cultural and social phenomena such as divorce, or a couple's inability to have children. The stages have long been considered to be fixed and unchanging, but the theory may not be applicable for someone who chooses not to get married, which precludes the stages of marriage, children, and launching by those children. The theory is based on a Western and northern European family model, which implies that issues surrounding gender, race, and social class are not considered, but these are important to consider, as they form part of the larger systems family system (Falicov, 2016).

However, the life cycle theory aids in providing a framework to gain further insight into the individual experiences of adult children who have moved back home in relation to the impact on adult children and the ability or inability to achieve the prescribed milestones considered for adulthood. Additionally, the use of this theory assesses the applicability and relevance of the theory within the South African context.

### Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed selected literature on the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences which influenced adult children to move back to their parents' home (defining parents in a wide sense). The chapter also highlights the impact of moving back home on adult children and their parents, and how this influences the parent-adult-child dynamic through the lens of Family Systems theory. Furthermore, the Family Life Cycle theory is considered to illuminate the impact of moving back to the parental home on the adult child in relation to specific societal milestones and how these may vary in different contexts. Chapter 3 presents the methodology implemented to carry out the study.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

In this chapter, the methodology applied in the research process is described. As indicated in Chapter 1, the aim of the study was to explore the psychological experiences of adult children who moved back in with their parents in South Africa and the impact of that move. The move was made to address the economic consequences of the nationwide lockdown implemented at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study wanted to look at the factors that contributed to the decision to move back, the psychological well-being of the adult children who made the move back, and how they coped with the psychological impact of moving back home. In order to reach these aims, the right research design and methodology had to be chosen.

This chapter provides a description of the theoretical framework that underpinned the choice of the research design. This is followed by a discussion of the research design that was selected and the appropriateness of the design for this research study. The various processes of the research design that made up the qualitative methodology of the study are considered, including the choice of appropriate participants, the sampling methods used, data collection, background on the chosen sample, and the process of data analysis. The chapter addresses how the principles of qualitative rigour were met, as well as ethical considerations and the researcher's positionality (in the form of self-reflexivity).

## Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides a qualitative researcher with a lens through which data collection is done, and the data are analysed (Henstrand, 2006). This implies that the theoretical framework that is chosen plays a role in the interpretation of the data that are

gathered, and provides the purpose, motive, and assumptions for a research study (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

The theoretical framework implemented in this research study was Family Systems theory, in particular the Family Life Cycle theory described in the previous chapter. This theoretical framework is the lens through which the participants' experience was understood. Bowen's Family System theory seeks to understand the individual within the emotional unit of the family and the impact of connectedness within the family on the individual (Knudson-Martin, 1994).

The family system shifts as a system throughout the life cycle of individuals in the context of the family life cycle. The process through the family life cycle is circular, requiring each family member to adjust to different roles within the family life cycle (Dankoski, 2001). In addition, progression through the family life cycle differs from family to family, because the stages are influenced by various factors, including culture and traditions that affect how and when members of the family shift from one life stage to another (McGoldrick, 1992). As stated earlier, this study focuses on the launching stage, because most of the participants were independent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and then had to return to the parental home, thus interrupting this process of differentiation.

**Research Design**

This exploratory study followed a qualitative research approach. The study is exploratory (as defined by Stebbins, 2011), because it aimed to investigate an understudied phenomenon about which there is limited knowledge – the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on adult children (particularly in South Africa) have not yet been widely studied. Therefore, the research sought to explore and understand the psychological impact on adult children who had to move back to their parental home because of COVID-19.

### *Qualitative Approach*

Qualitative research involves a process of investigating phenomena as they occur in a specific environment in society (Teherani et al., 2015). A qualitative approach ensures that research questions are answered, not by developing a hypothesis and gathering data, but rather by focusing on the data that emerge from the text and emphasising the experiences of participants in the context that these experiences occurred (Carter & Little, 2007). Therefore, qualitative research is conducted to explore the factors that contribute to the phenomena that are observed in societal settings, and the reasons for these phenomena (Busetto et al., 2020). Based on this premise, qualitative research is founded on the notion that individuals' experiences contribute to meaning that is socially constructed. However, participants may formulate and interpret experiences differently, resulting in different meanings for similar experiences (Merriam, 2002). Thus, participants in this study may have developed different meanings relating to their experience of the social and psychological consequences of COVID-19 as adult children because of shared or different experiences.

Qualitative research explores the "why" and "how" of social issues by assessing concepts, experiences, and meanings that individuals attach to events and their realities (Lune & Berg, 2017). Hence, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate, because it is effective in understanding the participants by involving them in the process to gain more insight into their attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and interactions (Pathak et al., 2013), in this case, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering that qualitative research explores a phenomenon, some of the advantages of qualitative research are that it can contribute to the development of a theory, and it is flexible because the researcher may note findings of phenomena that are unpredicted (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). One caveat is that it is subjective because of the interpretative lens of the researcher (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019), which is a risk addressed in the section on self-reflexivity later in this chapter.

### *Sample and Sampling*

A mixture of purposive and snowball sampling was used in this study.

Purposive sampling ensures that the information gathered is impactful and substantial. This was appropriate for this research study, because impactful and substantial information provides details surrounding the purpose of research (Patton, 1990). Therefore, purposeful sampling was chosen to select participants who could provide valuable information towards a comprehensive understanding of the research question, as recommended by Emmel (2013). Purposive sampling required the selection of participants based on predetermined characteristics, making this type of sampling non-random (Etikan et al., 2016).

Participants were recruited purposively through various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (see Appendix A). Information about the research study was posted and shared on these social media platforms. Participants were selected to participate in the research based on pre-determined criteria:

- Participants had to be between 25 and 30 years.
- Participants had to have moved home as a result of financial challenges that arose during the COVID-19 lockdown. These financial challenges could be the result of unemployment, limited or reduced work responsibilities, and reduced salaries which affected participants' ability to sustain independent living.

People who expressed an interest in participating in the research study were emailed the information sheet, which explained the purpose of the research, as well as a consent form to indicate their agreement to participate, and their permission to record the interviews for use in the research study (see Appendix A).

In addition, snowball sampling was used to expand the sample of appropriate participants who could participate in the study. Snowball sampling is often used when it turns out to be challenging to recruit participants from the original specified sample (Sedgwick, 2013). In

this study, participants were difficult to access, even though several platforms were used to recruit participants. In line with Parker et al. (2019), snowballing was then adopted. This involved asking the initial participants who had already agreed to participate to recommend the research study to others in their networks who met the criteria for participation in the study. The call for participation post encouraged my social media followers from the outset to share the post with their own followers to broaden the reach of the sample.

This research study initially aimed to gather data from ten participants. Although some studies on an appropriate sample size for qualitative research suggest that 12 to 13 interviews are adequate (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), theory on qualitative research usually emphasises that there is no fixed limit on how big or small a sample should be. Instead, the sample size depends on the purpose of the research and what the researcher hopes to attain (Patton, 1990). The number of participants stipulated should ensure that data saturation is achieved within the given sample size. Data saturation occurs when a study has sufficient information to analyse and no new information is being gathered, and the researcher has accomplished collecting the data that the researcher set out to gather (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To address challenges such as not reaching data saturation, I aimed to continue to recruit additional participants until I was sure that the quality of the research would not be compromised.

Sampling proved challenging, despite the fact that the post about the study was shared widely. The social media posts still did not gain the traction needed to recruit the envisaged number of participants. Some potential participants who initially indicated interest in participating in the study decided did not to participate in the study for two main reasons. One was that it proved difficult to schedule interviews because potential participants did not respond after indicating interest. Another was that some who demonstrated interest in the study did not in fact meet the inclusion criteria of the study, for example, because they had

not moved back into the parental home, or they had not experienced changes in their work responsibilities and income. Subsequently, for the purpose of this research, only seven young adults from the South African population were recruited

Although specific reasons for the lack of interest in the study among young adults cannot be determined, considering the social context of the study, one reasons can be suggested: COVID-19 fatigue, which has been defined as experiencing a sense of tiredness in response to the COVID-19 rules and regulations to ensure the virus is not spread (Michie & West, 2020). Studies have found that people experienced COVID-19 fatigue in relation to different aspects of COVID-19, including the workplace (Kalwani, 2021), Zoom fatigue from increased numbers of video conferences for meetings (Fauville et al., 2021), and anxiousness from exposure to news surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020).

One limitation regarding the sample is that it includes only female participants. This is not unusual in qualitative studies, since it has been found that women are more willing to be research participants than men are (Curtin et al., 2000; Moore & Tarnai, 2002). Another limitation is that most of this study's sample is white participants. Webb et al. (2019) investigated differences between black and white participants' willingness to participate in research. They noted that black people demonstrated less desire to participate in research studies (Webb et al., 2019). Such reactions have been attributed to mistrust in researchers (Yancey et al., 2006; Shavers et al., 2002).

### *Data Collection*

The data obtained for the purposes of this research focused on personal accounts of young adults' experiences of moving back to the parental home because of the national lockdown and its financial impact and on the effect of this move on family relationships. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. A semi-structured interview is an

interview between two or more people in which information is exchanged between the interviewer and the interviewees. Predetermined questions were discussed and agreed upon between myself and my supervisor prior to the interviews. The questions (see Appendix B) were designed to allow the participants enough flexibility to share information on what they experienced and deemed relevant, as recommended by Clifford et al. (2010).

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate data collection tool for this research to provide me with an opportunity to change the questions as the interview progressed and gather more details of the interviewees' experiences outside of information gathered by the predetermined questions, as explained by Luo and Wildemuth (2017). The list of interview questions as the data collection instrument can be found in Appendix B.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the government, the interviews were conducted online. Online interviews pose both advantages and limitations that may influence the interview. Online interviews are convenient and allow access to participants, irrespective of the location of the researcher and the individual participant, therefore expanding the reach and access to participants (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). However, online interviews pose challenges regarding the ability to observe verbal and non-verbal cues from the participants depending on the positioning of the device being used. In addition, connectivity issues can influence the quality of the audio and video of the interview (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Other challenges that have been noted by prior researchers include participants' access to the internet and Wi-Fi in developing countries, as well as the complexity of discussion around sensitive topics and the ability of the researcher to engage in empathy using non-verbal and verbal cues (Sah et al., 2020).

The videoconferencing platform used to conduct the online interviews was Zoom. Archibald et al. (2019) conducted a study to determine the validity of Zoom as a data collection tool. The study found Zoom to be viable for data collection, despite its challenges,

because it provides convenience, it enables researchers and participants to establish rapport, and the platform is easy to navigate (Archibald et al., 2019). The use of Zoom was fairly effective in this research study. The participants and I were able to establish rapport, and scheduling interviews was convenient and easy. In some cases, limited connectivity did prove challenging, affecting the audio and video quality. However, participants were flexible regarding alternatives to improve connectivity (for example, by using a different Wi-Fi connection).

Interviews were scheduled once the potential participants had shown interest in participating in the study, and it had been ascertained that they met the inclusion criteria. The interviews were scheduled one by one, as the participants shared their interest in participating in the study, and tried to accommodate both parties as far as possible. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. The plan was that once the individual interviews had been conducted with the participants, follow-up interviews would be arranged with the participants if further clarification was needed. However, follow-up interviews were not needed, so each participant was interviewed only once. The interviews were recorded, and were transcribed after the interview process with the participants was completed. This was done with the participants' consent, and no recordings were made without such consent.

### *Background Information on the Participants*

- **Participant 1: Anna**

  Anna is a white woman who lived in Johannesburg and was aged 28 years at the time of the interview. Before the pandemic, Anna had lived in South Korea for two years and had then moved back to Johannesburg, where she lived with her partner. They lived together in an apartment for a year and a half. Anna and her partner applied to immigrate to Canada and were awaiting approval. While waiting for approval, Anna's partner planned

to go to South Korea in March 2021. Anna worked at a remedial school in Johannesburg. Then the COVID-19 virus reached South Africa, and Anna resigned because of the pandemic and began to teach online. Because of their plans, Anna and her partner moved out of their apartment and moved back in with their respective parents in December 2020. Anna and her partner were expected to wait eight months until their application to Canada would be approved. As a result, Anna's lived with her parents in Johannesburg (her mother and her father) for an extended period.

- **Participant 2: Beth**

  Beth is a white woman, aged 26 years at the time when the interview was conducted, and she then lived in Johannesburg. Before the pandemic, she was in Cape Town for two years, where she worked in the film industry and lived with housemates. She planned to return to Johannesburg only for the initial lockdown of three weeks when the COVID-19 virus reached South Africa, but she ended up remaining in Johannesburg indefinitely. Beth was retrenched from her job a few weeks into the national lockdown, because her work was deemed a non-essential service. As a result, Beth was without work for eight months. During this time, she continually applied for jobs and eventually secured employment in the marketing industry, but her income was not sufficient for her to live independently. While she was in Johannesburg, she stayed with her mother, who assumed financial responsibility for the household. Beth also has a brother who is four years younger and was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He did not respond well to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Participant 3: Kuhle**

  Kuhle is a black woman who was aged 25 years at the time of the interview, and was then living in Johannesburg. She completed her postgraduate studies the year before the interview was conducted. Kuhle sought employment for a year and had applied for

several jobs, but struggled to secure work. Kuhle had lived independently as a student and had sustained herself with the stipend that she received as university funding. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she lived with her aunt and uncle and their younger children. Kuhle was originally from Mpumalanga, but moved in with her aunt and uncle to access resources such as Wi-Fi and volunteering opportunities, which were very limited in her home town. At the time of the interview, Kuhle volunteered at an organisation that advocated for and provided mental health services. Because Kuhle had not secured employment, her aunt and uncle supported her financially.

- **Participant 4: Denise**

  Denise is a white woman, and she was aged 25 years at the time of the interview. Prior to the pandemic, Denise applied for work in aviation in Doha, in the Middle East. Her application was accepted and she relocated to Doha in February 2020. Denise arrived in Doha and began her training as an air hostess. She was six weeks into her training when the COVID-19 virus pandemic struck, resulting in COVID-19 restrictions across the world. This influenced travel between countries. Hence, Denise was laid off soon after COVID-19 began to spread. The company that employed Denise sent out a directive that all employees had to return to their home country. However, Denise was unable to return to South Africa immediately, and had to stay in Doha for six months before she was able to return home. When she arrived in South Africa, she had to complete a 14-day quarantine at a government-approved hotel. After completing the specified quarantine, Denise returned to her parents' home. Denise was in the process of reapplying to the aviation company in Doha at the time of the interview, and she was completing an Honours degree while she waited to move back to Doha.

- **Participant 5: Nothando**

Nothando is a black woman, and she was 28 years of age and lived in Johannesburg at the time of her interview. Nothando worked in the hospitality industry. She had moved out of her parents' home in November 2019 and lived independently, renting her own apartment for six months. Her apartment was located close to the company where she worked. Nothando's work responsibilities were reduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a large reduction in her monthly income. She decided to move back home to her mother and father. Around the time the interview was conducted, her father moved to Botswana to pursue employment there, but Nothando maintained a close relationship with her mother and siblings. Nothando travelled 80 km every day to get to work from her parents' home. During lockdown, Nothando attempted to seek additional employment to supplement her income, but found finding work challenging. She decided to advance her qualifications by registering to further her studies within her field, but was confronted with various challenges, especially lacking energy and motivation because of the stress she experienced, so she paused her studies for the time being.

- **Participant 6: Gabriella**

  Gabriella is a white woman, and she was 23 years of age at the time of the interview. Gabriella completed her postgraduate degree in Film Studies in 2020. Gabriella planned to emigrate overseas for better employment opportunities in the international film industry. However, she was unable to pursue these plans because of the COVID-19 pandemic and remained at home. Gabriella lived in Johannesburg with her family. This included her father, her mother, and her older sister, who was 25 years of age (two years older than Gabriella). Both Gabriella's parents and sister had comorbidities that could be worsened by the COVID-19 virus. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Gabriella's parents and her older sister worked from home. In 2021, she was able to secure employment as a

lecturer in her field of study. Gabriella earned an income, but she continued to live at her parental home.

- **Participant 7: Hannah**

  Hannah is a white woman who was 25 years of age at the time of the interview. She lived in Johannesburg with her family, including her father, her mother, and her younger sister. Before the pandemic, Hannah worked as a social worker and lived independently for approximately one year. Hannah planned to emigrate overseas to complete her postgraduate degree in Social Work. All the necessary documentation for her move overseas had been approved, and her lease ran out a few weeks before her flight. As she prepared to leave, Hannah returned to live with her parents for the time being. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that several countries implemented, Hannah was unable to emigrate. She continued to live with her family during the COVID-19 pandemic and planned to pursue alternative options for her to complete her postgraduate studies overseas.

### *Data Analysis*

After the data had been collected in the semi-structured interviews, the data were analysed using a specific method of thematic analysis. The approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was chosen. Thematic analysis is used to identify, examine and account for patterns and themes that are evident in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, thematic analysis is a method used to analyse data in qualitative research by identifying themes relating to specific customs, beliefs, and ideals that an individual experiences that are categorised and interpreted to identify relationships between themes, theories, and principles (Mills et al., 2010). Thematic analysis is useful because it effectively organises data and describes the data in a detailed manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysing the data by themes has several advantages and disadvantages. A few of the advantages include that categorising data by themes is an efficient and flexible approach that can be adjusted according to the requirements of the study. It does not involve specific procedures and prescriptions that need to be adhered to, and provides a structure to present the research findings in a well organised manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). However, thematic analysis has been criticised as a method. Nowell et al. (2017) note that one of the disadvantages of using thematic analysis is that there is only a limited literature available on the method, in comparison to the literature on other qualitative methods of analysis. The level of flexibility of the method may also contribute to incoherence and inconsistency in categorising the data according to themes.

For the purposes of this research, thematic analysis was used as an appropriate method to examine and determine the experience of moving back home for adult children. The analysis following the guidelines below, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

- **Step 1: Familiarising yourself with the data**

  The first step suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) requires researchers to submerge themselves into the data that have been gathered, by transcribing the interviews and engaging in continuous reading of the data to gain an in-depth understanding of the data. In this study, I began to familiarise myself with the data when the interviews were conducted and when each of the interviews were transcribed. This helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the content and each participant's experiences before creating the codes. I read over each transcription separately to identify potential codes.

- **Step 2: Generating initial codes**

  The second step follows once a researcher has become familiar with the data. The researcher then creates the initial list of codes identified from the data and organises them in a meaningful manner. Therefore, I created codes from the data in an organised manner to group data that would be associated with a specific code. This was done by reading the transcriptions and codes. The codes serve as labels, and are ascribed to a piece of the text in the transcriptions of the interviews. They can take in the form of a single word or a phrase to highlight the meaning of the piece of text, according to Waeraas (2022). Corbin and Strauss (2008) also discuss a form of open coding which requires the researcher to analyse the data by brainstorming to consider all the possible labels that could best interpret the text and then applying a label as a code. Overall, identifying codes contributed to the development of patterns and themes to answer the research question, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

- **Step 3: Searching for themes**

  The researcher uses the codes identified in Step 2 to analyse them to identify codes that can be combined to contribute to the development of an overarching theme. To achieve this step, I reread the transcriptions for themes by identifying data related to each other or representing the same idea.

- **Step 4: Reviewing themes**

  Once the themes have been identified, Step 4 is refining the themes. This may involve reworking themes by combining them or creating separate them. This step required me to review the themes to determine whether the themes were appropriately associated with the codes and the data, and had the potential to be combined or disregarded. I then created a table to illustrate the themes from each transcription on the same excel spreadsheet. The themes were colour coded to identify them easily when writing the report. The

transcriptions and the table illustrations of the themes were sent to my supervisor to review the themes before finalising the description and naming of the themes.

- **Step 5: Describing and naming themes**

  Step 5 involves the definition or description and naming of themes by gaining an understanding of what the theme is communicating, and identifying the data that support the theme. In the current study, my supervisor and I defined and named the themes by refining the themes to ensure that they provided a clear description of the data. These themes were then presented as the analysis of the data.

- **Step 6: Producing the report**

  The final step is conducted when the themes have been finalised with the data that support the theme. The themes are then presented in a written form. Consequently, I developed a report on the themes that were selected and related to the research question and literature review. These results are set out in Chapters 4 and 5.

**Qualitative Rigour**

A high standard of quality research must be striven for throughout the research process, from determining the design, to conducting the research, and presenting the findings of the research (Johnson et al., 2020). This is ensured by ensuring qualitative rigour. The quality of good thematic analysis is ensuring by the researcher's implementation of theory and method, doing what the researcher has stated will be done (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, qualitative rigour was ensured by adhering to the following criteria: credibility, conformability, dependability, and transferability (Morse, 2015).

### *Credibility*

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the study and what the study discovers (Connelly, 2016). Thus credibility requires participants' experiences to be interpreted accurately for others to be able to recognise and relate to them (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Maintaining credibility involves prolonged engagement, observation, triangulation, peer debriefing in negative case analysis, and member checks (Morse, 2015).

In this study, credibility was ensured by asking the participants for more clarity during the interviews when necessary. Credibility was also ensured by referring back to the transcripts to present and quote the participants' experiences accurately. Finally, the credibility of the research was ensured using triangulation. Triangulation is the process of using multiple forms of information and procedures to collect data (Stahl & King, 2020). Although this study collected data using interviews only, the interpretations of the data were assessed by evaluating and verifying the data repeatedly, both independently and with my research supervisor, as recommended by Shenton (2004).

### *Transferability*

Transferability refers to the ability to transfer the findings and methods of the research study between groups (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Transferability is achieved by ensuring that participants' demographic and geographical information is provided in the study for the study to be replicated (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This methodology chapter of the study therefore includes relevant background information on each of the participants which outlines the demographic and geographical information.

### *Dependability*

Dependability contributes to trustworthiness by ensuring that the findings of a research study are consistent and can be reproduced by following the same design, method, and reporting of the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). To achieve dependability, this research study outlines and describes the reason for the study, as well as a discussion on the criteria for participation to explain why and how participants were selected for the study, in line with Thomas and Magilvy (2011). The research also provides an explanation concerning how the data were interpreted and presented to ensure that guidelines are provided to aid in further achieving credibility (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

### *Conformability*

Conformability relies on the establishment of credibility, transferability and dependability. Therefore, a researcher is required to be reflective and self-critical of the researcher's own biases, which may influence the research study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Although this study used a predetermined interview schedule, the participants were able to expand on their answers and share their experiences beyond the parameters of the interview schedule.

## Ethical Considerations

The research study adhered to ethical principles to ensure that the participants were protected, as suggested by Mohd Arifin (2018). Each participant must be provided with comprehensive information regarding the research study. This was to ensure that the participant understands what the research involves to help the participant make an informed decision about participation in the study (Mohd Arifin, 2018).

Participants were given an informed consent document to sign. The letter of informed consent (see Appendix A) aimed to ensure that the participant understood the purpose of the research, what was required from participants, the steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and participants' rights as research participants.

Anonymity was not possible, because the interviews were conducted face-to-face using video and audio on the Zoom platform. However, confidentiality was maintained by ensuring that the pertinent details relating to a participant's identity, and the information shared with the researcher are not made public, and are not shared with anyone outside of this research project. Once data were collected, transcription of the data was completed in a private room and with headphones in an effort to maintain confidentiality, in line with the recommendation by Mohd Arifin (2018). The data collected were stored on my laptop in folders protected by passwords. My laptop also has a security password to avoid access by others.

Lastly, it was important to consider and inform participants with severely strained relationships with their parents that they might experience distress in talking about their experiences, and that the interview process might trigger them. The topic under discussion could be potentially emotionally distressing for the participants participating in the research study. In an attempt to avoid any harm and maintain the participants' well-being, participants were given the details of a counselling service to contact in case they experienced emotional distress, namely the Community Psychology Clinic at the Emthojeni Centre at Wits. The participants were provided with the administrator's contact details to make an appointment for short-term counselling at the Emthojeni Centre, if the need for counselling arose as a result of their participation in this study.

The research participation letter and the consent form shared with the participants can be found in Appendix A.

**Self-reflexivity**

In conducting this research, the researcher attempted to understand and present the participant's experiences as accurately as possible. However, it should be acknowledged that a researcher's role involves understanding and presenting the participants' experience from a framework that is influenced by the researcher's preferred theoretical orientation, and personal and cultural beliefs (Luttrell, 2000). Consequently, Luttrell (2000) argues that a researcher should strive to be a "good enough" researcher, which requires the researcher to be aware of and accept the healthy tensions that may occur between the researcher and the participants, and understand that errors and mistakes may occur because of the researcher's personal bias and involvement in the participants' focus. Hence, researchers should engage in self-reflexivity to practise and develop their awareness in the research study. However, a researcher should engage in reflexivity not only to ensure rigour in the research study, but to promote transformative learning through the process (Popoveniuc, 2014). Adler (2022) defines reflexivity as the researcher's process of reflecting on and identifying the researcher's and participants' social position and how these may influence the interpretation of data and the development of knowledge from the data.

Importantly, Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) argue that reflexivity does not seek to ensure objectivity, but should aim to highlight the importance of the fact that aspects of the researcher's personal and interpersonal traits and context are closely associated with contextual and methodological aspects of the research that may influence the construction of knowledge. Therefore, reflexivity seeks to ensure that a researcher maintains a sense of awareness of biases and intersubjectivity that can influence the researcher's interpretation of the data, because researchers cannot remain impartial (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014).

The first consideration in attempting to maintain reflexivity was the motive behind the research question. When I was considering a research question, the country was experiencing

the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the virus was spreading rapidly. During this time, I reflected on my personal experiences of living at home with my parents during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Therefore, I wanted to understand the experiences of other young adults who moved back home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the reasons that influenced their move home, and the impact of the move on their well-being and mental health.

Therefore, it was pivotal that trustworthiness was maintained in this study. Marrow (2005) argues that trustworthiness is maintained by ensuring that the culture and context of the participants are considered for the researcher to understand the participants' experiences thoroughly, and to mutually construct the meanings participants attach to their experiences.

It was vital to engage in reflexivity to increase my personal awareness throughout the research study. Specifically, I had to acknowledge my role as the researcher and the power that accompanies being a researcher. The power and positionality of the researcher and the participants of the research depend largely on the identities of the researcher and participants, such as their race, ethnicity, cultural background, gender, level of education, and job, which can all have an impact on power-sharing within the research study (Muhammad et al., 2015). Additionally, power can be present in three different ways in a research study. Muhammad et al. (2015) argue that power is practised in the positionality of the researcher's identity in relation to the identity of participants in the community being researched. The practice of power is also evident in the process of the research, especially in establishing the research question, choosing the research design, and making decisions throughout the process. Finally, power is exerted when the researcher writes and presents the results gathered from the data collected through interactions with the participants (Muhammad et al., 2015).

Therefore, to address issues of power, I tried to maintain an awareness of the demographic factors shared between me, the researcher, and the participants. These factors

included age, gender, education, socioeconomic factors, and similar experiences while living in the parental home. Although these shared factors aided me in establishing rapport with the participants, I was aware that my level of education and my role as an extension of the university as an institution may overshadow the participants' involvement in the construction of knowledge. The participants' involvement in the production of knowledge may have been influenced by the pre-determination of the topic to be discussed, my control over guiding the interview with pre-determined questions, and maintaining control to decide when to end the interview, as Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) point out. This was evident in the interview schedule that was used during the interviews. Upon reflection, it became clear that the interview schedule could have been influenced by my personal beliefs and experiences, as I might be asking questions which had the potential to gather data that aligned with my beliefs and experiences. Therefore, I tried to mitigate this by reassuring the participants that they were not obligated to provide any information they did not feel comfortable disclosing. I also tried to allow the participants to share, even when they shifted to something which was not on the topic I was probing, and I tried to clarify and verify my understanding of their experiences. Additionally, I was aware that I might have overidentified with some of the participants, which had the potential to drown out these participants' voices and influence the participants to share information they might have not wanted to disclose, something that Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) warn researchers about. Therefore, I tried to mitigate this challenge by recognising when I was overidentifying and then shifting to a more objective mode in the interviews and allowing the participants more opportunities to share their experiences.

Moreover, upon further reflection, it must be acknowledged that the participants were not provided with an opportunity to engage in member-checking of the transcripts to contribute to qualitative rigour. Although an opportunity to do so was not promised to the

participants, and the practice raises various ethical concerns, the process of member-checking could have enhanced the accuracy of the information and contributed to further accuracy when analysing and interpreting the data (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Almlund (2013) argues that a researcher maintains power through a monopoly over the interpretation of the participant's experiences in the final report. Similar to Luttrell (2000), Almlund (2013) suggests that the interpretation of participants' experiences is influenced by the beliefs, culture, and ideals of the researcher. In that context, it is evident that my personal beliefs and experiences concerning the research question would inform the lens I used to analyse and interpret the data that were collected. Thus, in a further attempt to remain reflexive, I shared the transcriptions and analysis of the data with my research supervisor for additional input in identifying and reporting on the themes accurately. To ensure that the participants' voice was present. I provide extensive quotations from the interviews and analyse the quotes according to the context of the participants, as recommended by Muhammad et al. (2015).

**Conclusion**

The chapter has provided an overview of the methodology chosen for the purposes of this study. The chapter explained the choice of design and the qualitative approach. The sampling and the participants recruited for the study were described in detail. The chapter also described the process of the data analysis and accounted for how qualitative rigour was maintained. Lastly, the chapter highlighted the researcher's reflexivity at different stages while conducting the research, and the ethical considerations to ensure the participants' well-being was maintained. The themes that were identified in the data collection are presented in the next chapter.

# Chapter 4: Findings

## Introduction

This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data gathered in the interviews. The themes and subthemes are presented with quotations from the interviews.

The main themes that were identified during the data analysis were firstly, the negative impact of COVID-19 on employability, secondly, individual experiences of moving back home, thirdly, changes in familial relationships, fourthly, differences in perceptions of adulthood, and finally, the effect of the move on the family life cycle. These themes are discussed below. Quotations are included verbatim, in italics, without corrections to participants' grammar or wording.

## The Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Employment

A broad theme that was common among the participants was the negative impact that COVID-19 had on their employment. It was evident that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the participants' employment in various ways. Some lost their employment, for some, their work role diminished, others were unable to find employment, and still others were unable to emigrate to seek work and further their education. This meant that the economic impact of work limitations led to the need to move back home with their parents because of the financial constraints the participants experienced.

### *Loss of Employment*

Two of the participants, Beth and Denise, were retrenched during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the impact of the pandemic on some industries.

Beth used to work in the film industry, but filming stopped, as film-making was not considered an essential service: "*All [film] shooting was stopped around the country…it wasn't*

*considered essential and we didn't know when it was gonna go back*." She explained that "*they had to shut down for money reasons*." As a result of the work restrictions imposed on non-essential industries, Beth was retrenched within a week of the first national lockdown: "*[M]y work gave our…resignation forms and everything, so, then I was kinda stuck here and I decided to stay here and move back in you know? I mean we got the letter literally as the first lockdown happening kinda in the first week*."

Denise also lost her job. She was employed in the aviation industry, training to be an air hostess/flight attendant in Doha, in the Middle East, when the COVID-19 virus began spreading. Most countries implemented international travel restrictions, severely limiting flights between countries. This meant that flight attendants were not required, resulting in the retrenchment of thousands of employees:

> *…they clean[ed] out the airline by 40 000 people. So, 40 000 people, we all got made redundant, we were all sent back to our accommodations and they were literally like, 'your embassy will be in contact with you to go back home'.*

***Diminished Work Role***

In many instances, participants' work roles were reduced. Although a few of the participants did remain employed, they were subject to salary cuts and changes to their work responsibilities. Nothando also worked within an industry that was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, namely the hospitality industry:

> *So, I work at a hotel … the nature of our business is 24/7, and there…there always needs to be someone [on] the property… [there was] one shift which [was] a 12-hour shift from 8 in the morning until 8 in the evening, …just so we can relieve the company from paying us a lot of money during that period because it was tough times for everyone so...*

Although Nothando was employed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown, her salary was cut:

> *We were getting an income but …because of salary cuts there, it was only 20% of our salary. And, it was 20% of our salary plus however many shifts you do during the period.*

> *So, you had to make sure that you do more, four or more shifts to at least get a bit of a relief but, it wasn't much, because 20%, how can you survive on 20%?*

Beth also experienced a reduction in her salary when she became employed again, attributing this to the pandemic: "*[P]re-COVID [I] possibly would have got like a salary twenty-five thousand [Rands] upwards. Where now, they asking a salary of ten thousand Rands.*" Moreover, Beth's salary did not align with the amount of work she had to do, making her feel as if she was being underpaid: "*I like my job that I do now, but it doesn't pay what it should be paying, but I work my ass off*."

Likewise, Hannah worked in a professional field, social work, that was unable to operate to full capacity because of COVID-19 restrictions. Hannah was absorbed into an organisation where she could use the professional skills she had developed, but her approach to her work changed:

> *… with my profession social work is very actively involved with people on like a grassroots level. You know, you [are] in that client's house, you [are] sitting on their floor doing a home visit, and now, all of a sudden, the world is telling us, don't be more than 1.5 m away from someone…So, I had to find a job where I can still do what I love and what I'm 'decent' at, and you know still, be safe with the pandemic.*

***Being Unable to Find Employment***

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected participants' ability to find employment, as in the case of Beth and Denise. Beth had difficulty finding work after she was retrenched from her company: "*No jobs were open. Obviously, I applied and tried to get into marketing and stuff a lot sooner because I knew that I could do a career transition quite easily … but nothing… there was really nothing.*" Denise was also unable to find work, and decided to use her time to further her postgraduate studies instead: "*I couldn't apply for jobs …, because there were no jobs… I literally sat at home until December. Where this year I have actually applied and I am busy doing my Honours.*"

In some instances, participants were about to enter the job market when the pandemic began. Kuhle and Gabriella had just completed their postgraduate studies, but were unable to find employment. Kuhle explains: "*I haven't been able to [find work]. I have been applying […] since last year when I was doing my Honours*." In addition, Kuhle described feeling demotivated because she witnessed others around her struggle to secure employment or lose their jobs: "*...I am aware that ..., like so many people, are getting retrenched, uhm, losing their jobs because of the impact of COVID… it just sort of felt like, okay, now like, I'm doomed anyway*." In an attempt to secure employment, Kuhle even relocated to a different province, making her "*home with my aunt and her family… they offered me to stay with them…, cause they [are] in Joburg and they were expecting me to … perhaps get better opportunities? Better job opportunities this side compared to being home…*". She also hoped that would increase her access to organisations where she could work to increase her level of experience in her field: "*...they tell you, we should have a little bit of experience so…, being in Joburg affords me the opportunity to ...work with organisations that were recommended*" for volunteer work.

Gabriella was unemployed for a few months after graduating. She reported her difficulty in securing a job:

> *But that made it a bit more difficult for me because so, I'm in the film industry so I make movies for a living… So, people weren't making movies, and even if they were making movies, they didn't have enough money to spend because people were now not spending money on making films and those kinds of things. So, I didn't have work for a few months.*

***Being Unable to Emigrate for Work or Educational Purposes***

The pandemic also affected those who planned to emigrate, either to seek employment or to further their education. COVID-19 meant that the emigration process was halted. One participant had to return to South Africa. Anna and her partner had plans in place to emigrate overseas in 2019, "*[W]e applied [for residency in Canada] in 2019. ... it was all going*

*according to plan and then, ja, COVID happened*." The delayed process turned out to continue one year into the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *[M]y boyfriend and I are in the process of emigrating to Canada. We've put our papers in and we [are] kinda just waiting for them to approve us now. Um… and because of COVID we were told it was going to take some extra time because all like government offices are obviously working at minimum capacity so though we had planned to go sometime this year uhm… they told us to add an extra 8 months on.*

Anna also explained how her partner was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *[My boyfriend and I] aren't really happy in South Africa, so, he decided that he wanted to go back to South Korea for the period um... up until we get our Canadian residency. Um… and he was actually planning to leave in March of this year [2021] because their contracts start in March. So, we moved out of our unit in December [2020] thinking he was leaving in March [2021] but then because of COVID South Korea shut their borders to all South Africans, [and] his contract got cancelled.*

Hannah was about to immigrate to Ireland to complete a Master's degree in Social Work and had already made travel plans:

> *I booked a ticket. I had all my work stuff in place. I had all my paperwork in place. And then we [had] lockdown and they lock[ed]down, and just said, sorry no one can come in, at the moment. You just have to wait. And they have never come out of lockdown.*

As a result, Hannah was unable to go to Ireland and moved back home with her parents:

> *I was actually moving overseas to do my Master's in Ireland so my life was in boxes. I had a two-week period before I had to leave and my rent was,… my lease was obviously up. So, um, I said, my parents said move home if you want to stay here for a month. I was leaving in March and the week before I left they put us into lockdown. So, I didn't, I 'moved' home because I was supposed to leave and then I was stuck here because of COVID.*

Gabriella had also planned to move overseas: "*...so before COVID, my plan was to move to America with my best friend, and we were just going to go make it in the industry… America is not letting people in, so, we can't go. So, I was like, 'Okay cool, I'm going to have to do something else'*."

Denise was living abroad, training, when the pandemic began and was retrenched requiring her to return to South Africa. Denise experienced several challenges:

> *…when I was in Doha, I was stuck there for 6 months. I couldn't contact the embassy. I had… they had taken my passport, so, I couldn't just book a ticket and go. I was stuck in a foreign country and I was like, okay now what? I'm completely and utterly struck so, [by] that sense of hopelessness.*

Denise also struggled to travel back to South Africa,

> *I had to contact the South African embassy to allow me to come back on a repatriation flight. [It] was an absolute disaster because one day they were in, one day they were off, one day they didn't know who you were, the next day they knew everything about you... it was the [eeriest] sensation…I, we [was] booked onto three separate flights. Each time they got cancelled, cancelled, cancelled, cancelled because South Africa wasn't allowing people to come back in.*

Consequently, she was not able to return home immediately, "*...I literally just waited there from March, so February up until April*." She also experienced very significant restrictions while waiting to return home:

> *…in Doha because they had our passports, they gave us like a special permit on a piece of paper that was stamped by the police. So, you had to carry this paper around. You had to wear gloves, latex gloves. You had to wear a mask and you had to wear a face visor. And if you didn't, it was a 500 Riyal fine, I mean that equates to about R2500 for not having one of the three [items]."*

***The Economic Impact of Work Limitations***

The factors discussed above had a significant economic impact on the lives of the participants. Beth was unable to sustain her pre-COVID lifestyle, despite finding new employment, explaining that "*... with my salary I have now, I couldn't move out and uh,... stay by myself again or even a housemate because it just doesn't make sense*."

Hannah explained that she was concerned that she no longer had the financial capacity to live independently:

> *But I think uhm, with the state of the world just, you know, finding somewhere to stay is also quite expensive, and I don't know if on my current salary, I'd be able to, you know? Because everybody got salary cuts or you not making what you did before. So, I don't know if I would be able to sustain myself, I probably would, because you know, you make it work.*

The reduced income made it difficult for Beth to pay the monthly instalments for the car she had bought prior to the COVID-19 pandemic: "*I was paying this car off every month using all of my savings uhm… watching it deplete and I couldn't even stare at my car.*"

Similarly, Nothando experienced difficulty with her car payments:

> *There was a moment when I actually thought I was going to lose my car. I still remember it was the month, it was February this year [2021] [when] I thought I was going to lose my car because, ah, the insurance called… no the car dealership is calling me, 'you missed one month of payment'.*

Nothando then had to rely on her mother to support her

> *…instantly she called her sister and her sister paid, gave her money and said, 'Pay for [Nothando's] car.' You know, even talking about it now, it breaks my heart to even think about like, all the people that supported us. It was the most difficult time in our lives.*

Overall, Nothando was unable to sustain herself financially, because of the economic impact of her diminished work role and salary:

> *And to expect someone to pay your own bills and at that point, you say you employed was, it was not easy. It was truly not easy. So, acceptance was the most difficult thing. For me to accept that I have a job but I can't even buy myself a packet of chips. I'm gonna use chips because it's a small item.*

Denise relocated to her parents' home in South Africa after being retrenched in Doha – "*COVID hit and you literally had to go back home*." However, while Denise was waiting to return to South Africa, she also experienced financial difficulties in Doha:

> *They would give us a weekly allowance of like R500 to…, I mean that's R2000 a month, which is okay, I mean that R500, you had to make sure you had enough data, you had enough food – you were okay. House and that, you…, you were looked after in terms of housing like water and lights. But, transport and all of that stuff, I have never walked so much in the heat in my life – it's fine, it was fun. Um, but at the same time, [for] R500 you are forced to eat and sustain on the bare minimum.*

Lastly, Kuhle was distressed that she was unable to contribute financially while living with her aunt and uncle – she said: "*Like, I wish I could be contributing in some way*."

## Individual Experiences of Moving Back Home

The participants' understanding of adulthood contributed to how they made sense of their experience of moving back home. The participants' experiences reflected the following five themes: loss of independence, lack of personal space and privacy, social isolation and loneliness, mental health and well-being, and emotional and financial support.

### *Loss of Independence*

Most of the participants lived independently prior to moving back home, and were then unable to move out on their own again after the pandemic, because of their financial status at the time when the interviews were conducted. This resulted in feelings of a loss of autonomy (independence).

Anna lived independently for a few years before she moved back in with her parents; she noted, "*I have been out [of] the house for quite a long time before moving back in*." She also lived with her partner for over a year, "*... we had been living in our own little townhouse in Joburg… we were in our own home for a year and a half.*" They decided to move back to their respective parents' homes prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in preparation for emigrating overseas. However, they were unable to emigrate and Anna had to continue to live with her parents: "*... and then, ja, COVID cancelled all our plans so we moved back in with our parents and we've been here since. [He's] with his and I'm with mine*."

Beth was financially independent prior to the pandemic: "*I [ ] bought a new car...I could, you know, financially do that for myself… [and] I was renting with housemates*."

Nothando also lived independently before moving back in with her parents, but was unable to sustain this during the pandemic:

> *COVID hit hard of course, and the finances were not where they needed to be at that point… I think I lived so, COVID happened in March, [and] May, yes it was May when*

> *I moved back home. I was only able to pay rent for two months and the other month was a bit of a struggle.*

Some participants, such as Kuhle, lamented the loss of independence they experienced when they were living on their own: "*... [I have] been used to staying alone at res, used to being alone and feeling some sense of independence and getting money… an allowance from my bursary. So, I felt a bit [independent] back then….*"

Gabriella believed that it would be challenging for her to move out of her parent's home after COVID, because of the challenges she experienced in securing employment: "*[It] would make it harder to save money to move out of my house…*"

Several of the participants indicated experiencing a loss of independence because they became financially dependent on their parents following their move back home; for example, Denise explained: "*But also, for me, at the same time, it's not nice for me to – at [the] age of 25 – [ ] rely on my parents, you know*?"

Nothando had to depend on her mother to meet basic needs, such as buying groceries and filling her car up with petrol:

> *I mean when you so use to not relying on your parents, now you need to ask for money for petrol, you need to drive then to buy groceries um, simple data you know? Data you were able to buy for yourself, now you can't.*

This made her feel like a burden. She explained:

> *I felt useless. I felt really useless… Uhm, I, I had to now hear my mom say that she doesn't have money for me because I'm in this situation. That broke me a bit…; You know, Dani, it wasn't easy to see my parents were struggling financially, 'I don't have money' … At that point, I did not want her to feel that she is a failure as a mother because she's done a lot. So, it…it really…it hit home.*

Some experienced a lack of autonomy. Anna described it as follows: "*[I] miss like having to feel responsible for a home…; when you've had your own home you run it a certain way… I struggle with that and I have to remind myself it's not my house*."

Hannah felt governed by her parents' preferences of how they wanted things done:

> *So, the, the challenges I think of moving back home is I think for not the first time but, you know, when you move out, you…you kind of gain this independence, you know? It's, I can make dinner when I want. I can study when I need to. I can do whatever I want without telling anyone why I need to do it. Yes, like a dependent. You go back to being [ ] dependent. Like they always say, you, not an adult, you a sub-adult.*

***Lack of Personal Space and Privacy***

Several participants' experience included a lack of personal space and privacy. This was experienced as a challenge. Beth remarked that she experienced her mother as "mothering" her too much when she wanted her own space – "*I still kind of want my own space, my own independence. She still wants to mother me… sometimes I love it. Sometimes, I'm like, back off, like I just want to live my life…*" Similarly, Nothando explained:

> *I mean having my own space as well. I'm not able to like, do whatever I want to do at home. I mean I'm sharing space with other people which is…, I don't mind, they're family. But, when you love your own space, it just…it just feels like people are crowding you or…you know?*

Hannah reflected on the loss of her personal space, noting,

> *And also, I think now that I've been on my own, and I...I like my own space or certain things. It caused, not conflict, but you know, if I'm gonna go to bed at 10, I don't need my mom to tell me at 25 to 'go to bed early'.*

This lack of privacy also affected the participants' ability to maintain and navigate romantic relationships. This was especially difficult for those who had partners, those who had just started a new relationship, and those who wanted to commit to a new relationship.

Anna worried that her partner would be perceived as acting inappropriately: "*...we in my parent's house, uhm… like I get tense because I'm thinking is he doing something to make my mom upset*." In particular, the lack of privacy also had an impact on intimacy between the couple,

> *...if we want to be intimate with each other like… you can't just come home and do whatever you want to do like… you have to wait, to wait for parents to go to sleep, wait for parents to go out and it's like I'm sneaking around like a naughty teenager.*

Lastly, the lack of privacy contributed to parental interference in the relationship as Anna noted: "*...my boyfriend's mother is very interfering and controlling, and she doesn't really respect other people's boundaries*."

Beth also struggled to navigate her new relationship

> *... so, I'm in a new relationship now… I already haven't seen him for about like, a week and a half, and I was supposed to go see him yesterday but my mom confirmed positive and I think I just broke down because I felt like, oh my God, here it is happening again.*

Additionally, Beth experienced a dilemma between making decisions as an adult and asking for permission because she is living with her mother:

> *... I slept at his house and he was like are you allowed to? Do you have to ask your mom? ... I'm an adult, just because I'm living back doesn't mean I have to, need permission, like, I would do this stuff myself but it's almost like, that strange kind of, oh but you still living with your mom…*

Gabriella also shared her difficulties with romantic relationships.

> *...I even struggle…'cause, to be with a partner…because like my parents are home. I don't want them to see me flirting with someone [laughs] you know? That's also the struggle of being my age and having to stay at home because of COVID.*

***Social Isolation and Loneliness***

Social isolation and loneliness were also prevalent, as in the case of Gabriella, who sadly said,

> *...having to stay at home as well, on top of all [inaudible]… it's been challenging because it's not even like I can go out with some friends, and take my mind off of things because we…, I didn't see anyone for like, you actually, like ja, a year! ...I felt very isolated…*

This isolation was also experienced by those who were studying as a result of the shift from contact classes to online learning, for example, by Gabriella, "*Uhm, so, when I was doing my honours, it was really difficult because I wanted that experience of going to university, being with friends, being around people, going to classes*."

Denise also experienced loneliness and social isolation whilst quarantining at a hotel upon her return to South Africa:

> *This is your hotel quarantine…for 14 days we were stuck in the hotel… You couldn't leave… there were cops walking up and down the corridors to see that you wouldn't leave or open your door. Your food was brought to your door, they would knock, [and] you would go to collect it… you'd leave your rubbish outside…for 14 days we were stuck in the hotel… You couldn't leave… I think when I was probably at my [loneliest] because yes, you have your phone but it's different.*

***Mental Health and Well-being***

Several of the participants experienced some psychological distress during the pandemic. This included feelings of sadness, hopelessness and helplessness, low self-esteem, guilt, and anxiety. Some of the participants ascribed their distress to their employment status. Beth described a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in response to the interruption to her career:

> *I felt like everything that I built and worked towards had just been stripped away from me and there was nothing I could do to kind of grab it or hold onto it or bring it back. I just had to let it be and that was the hardest thing to do.*

This resulted in a lowered self-esteem for Beth:

> *I think often, like, it's a bit of a confidence…hit… not only losing your job but then having to move back here after I just gained my independence from home and kind of set up my own life…It was just like one confidence hit after the other.*

Kuhle also described a sense of hopelessness and helplessness when she was trying to secure employment:

> *…sometimes when I apply for something, I apply already feeling like, agh, I'm not gonna get it, I'm just applying to say I did something today, I put in the application even though, at [the] time, I do feel like, I know they just gonna reject me. They not gonna accept my application.*

Beth describes feeling depressed,

> *I don't want to say like deep depression but uhm… ja just lots of emotions, lots of sadness, lots of feeling like everything is out of my control and there's nothing I can do to grab onto it and hold onto it at the moment. There was literally nothing I could control.*

Similarly, Denise explains,

> *I try [to] be positive all the time because I was in a very dark place when we came back from Doha. I was very depressed, very sad, very upset…And genuinely, in that 14 days, I can say I was distracted. I was very dark, very down, I was crying…I have never cried that much in my life when I came back. And, even now, sitting and thinking about it – it's emotional because you.., you… you…you got to a point where everything was working out [and] it was kind of like the universe or COVID just said NO!*

As a result, she required medication: "*I, I'm not a very, I'm a very positive person but I had to go on anti-depressants because it's a complete shell shock*."

Conversely, Anna experienced a sense of guilt because of her privileged position:

> *I feel like extreme guilt… so many people have it so much [more] worse, so many people don't have parents to go to who can help them, so many people don't have happy homes they can stay in during this time, so many people have lost their jobs – I haven't lost my job... I know I'm so lucky for so much, and yet sometimes I still can't help but feel upset, like I might cry.*

Hannah explained the impact on her mental health:

> *...in that first week I think my mental health deteriorated so much…; I think just, at the time of my life, obviously like [a] breakup, COVID, lockdown, that had like a domino effect on my mental health…I just, I think was just so down and out. I couldn't understand why the world was 'doing this to me.'*

Gabriella, who already experienced mental health challenges prior to the pandemic, explained how these worsened

> *I also had depression and anxiety and [it] seemed to have gotten worse …Like, it affected how I am with people. It affected who I am as a person. It affected how I got things done. It affected my motivation to try and make something of myself even though all of these external factors were happening to me, you know?*

Nothando explained how her experience of stress also affected her physical health:

> *…during that period there were moments where one would get sick. So, with me, if I get stressed out my body talks to me, and um, I would frequently get sick – stomach ulcers and all of these things because I couldn't handle the pressure, and the stress levels and everything… As young as I am, I shouldn't be having heart palpitations because of stress. I shouldn't be unable to walk for two minutes because of stress [ ] like my joints will lock. I shouldn't be getting abnormal headaches here and there [ ]. It shouldn't be from the amount of stress that I'm giving myself on a day-to-day basis.*

Participants also experienced anxiety related to the COVID-19 virus. Most of the participants experienced anxiety around contracting the virus, and also possibly infecting parents who had comorbidities. Anna explained:

> *...fear of going to work every day with COVID at school with children… I don't know where the other teachers, children, and their families have been. It made me worry a lot because as it is I am a worrier and knowing that both my parents have comorbidities, I had this huge fear that something was going to happen to them… It really stressed me out… I was going to make my parents sick and they would end up dying because of me.*

Denise was also anxious,

> *I have literally been for about eight COVID tests, um, purely because of anxiety…My dad is a quadriplegic…if I am exposed to anything it can impact him greatly. So, my anxiety is heightened even more because now I am thinking about my dad at the same time.*

Gabriella elaborated,

> *I was so afraid that I would give COVID to my parents because my mom has chronic asthma, my dad is a cancer survivor, my sister has an autoimmune disease. So, that was so stressful for me that I didn't want to see my friends …*

Beth described struggling when her mother tested positive for COVID-19, "*… all of us kinda just had like an emotional breakdown because we just felt like, oh gosh it's so close to home now, it's real but also, it's our breadwinner, it's our life support, it's our emotional support*…" She also feared her mother might die, "*It's a very scary thing, and like again if my mom had to pass away tomorrow, I'm not set up in a financial way to look after my brother, continue his chronic medication…*"

A few of the participants also experienced anxiety related to the uncertainty about the future as Beth explained, "*It was like really scary what was happening in the world. I think it was the first time it was happening here. We were all really uncertain and unsure what [was] happening*..." She was also anxious when the lockdown restrictions were first announced:

> *...the immediate notice of the lockdown, I literally caught the last flight out to Johannesburg, and I just packed my bag and went. It was a bit of a panic. My mom phoned me and was like, listen I think you should just come up here because we don't know what's happening.*

Hannah explained that her anxiety was triggered by feeling unsafe and uncertainty.

*Because I think anxiety is always triggered by when we feel unsafe. So, for me, it was also very interesting to see psychologically that I'm in the safest place that I could possibly be like I know home is safe. But I still feel like nothing is certain.*

Denise described anxiety about her future career prospects:

*I think it's also just the uncertainty of not knowing what's next. This feeling of… like even now, last week Sunday I had my interview with Qatar Airways to go back but now I'm just sitting in limbo because I'm kind like, okay well I don't know, are they gonna take us, are they not taking us back?*

Hannah was uncertain about being able to pursue her postgraduate studies overseas:

*So, that, that feeling of you know, I had something to look forward to and now, I don't know if it will ever happen or I put so much effort into doing all the paperwork and staying up all hours to try and do what they required of me, and now it's like, I don't know if I'm going, I don't know if I'm going to further my career, I'm also getting older. You know, I… I had a plan and this is our problem. So, do my Masters [at] a specific age, and now I am realising that that may or may not happen.*

Some participants tried different mechanisms to cope with their mental health challenges. These included prayer, keeping busy with work or different activities, adopting a positive approach to situations, and self-reflection. Nothando described her coping mechanisms:

*So, I could still manage it the best way that I know how, uh, and music for me, was the best therapy. Ah, prayer for me was the best therapy and you know? Isolating myself from bad energies around [me], like, your friends, and, isolating myself from them was the best thing I did for myself.*

Hannah tried to be more proactive,

*So, I really you know, for me, I need to feel like I'm doing something. I need to feel like I'm actively engaged. So, I just took that and was like, okay apply it to your situation. So yes that, that's exactly for me the pivotal point that helped my mental health, being proactive and trying to find another avenue.*

This helped her maintain hope and see the different possibilities available to her:

*So, I know I can't cure coronavirus or make the pandemic end but maybe I can go and do my master's in a country where they will accept people because their coronavirus cases are not so high…I think that that helped me get out of that mind space of feeling*

*helpless, and feeling like I couldn't do anything or make any difference, and with that slowly… by slowly things kind of fell into place, you know?*

Denise explained that she became more aware of her mental health,

*… a positive to COVID might have been because it gave you time to kind of reset, maybe it's not the nicest reset that could have been done but, it gave us that space to process the darkness, the shadows, the negativity, you know? … I'm more consciously aware of my mental state than I was before you know? And I think that's what COVID forced me to do. It forced a lot of us to do [it]. And, I also think that with COVID, yes, it wasn't nice for me to come back home but it also gave me that time to spend more time with my parents, you know?*

Similarly, Gabriella also tried to reflect more positively on her behaviours:

*But now that I was forced to be by myself, it forced me to self-reflect within my own self and reflect on everything that I've done, everything that's happened, and how I could grow and use that time to be a better person. So, yes, I didn't take up a skill like knitting or, you know, something like that but I did do a lot of shadow work and self-reflection within myself which has helped me a lot, and I feel that time by myself has helped me evolve as a person into an adult where I can sit down and realise, 'okay cool, there's no more jolling, there's no more seeing friends, there's no more like putting things off'.*

However, she did not always feel as if her parents understood her struggles with mental health:

*So, my parents are…they have a lot of anxiety, but they just don't admit it because they [are] from [a] generation that doesn't talk about mental illness. You have to be completely loony to go to a psychologist. So, I mean, it, it was a real struggle for them to actually understand, you know, the depression and anxiety [is] heightened, during the times, between my sister and I.*

***Emotional and Financial Support***

All the participants benefited from the emotional and financial support they received from their parents and relatives. Kuhle experienced the support as follows when she trying to find work: "*They console me a lot…finding a job, it is hard, you will have to be patient and you know, some, some people are just luckier than others… don't, don't compare yourself with your friends and peers*.'

Denise described her parents' as supportive:

*We will look after you and financially support you…They were very supportive [of] me coming back home. I mean, my mom and dad both, I've always grown up in a very supportive home, very understanding home…, very loving environment.*

Nothando experienced emotional support from her mother:

*So, it actually helps because talking to her, she doesn't advise me as a mother but, in most cases, she advises me as a friend because she knows everything that I have been through whether it's relationships, whether it's friendships, she knows everything. She knows my life on the back end. So, she was quite supportive.*

Nothando was also financially supported by her larger family, at her mother's instigation:

*Instantly she called her sister and her sister paid, gave her money and said, 'Pay for [Nothando's] car'. You know, even talking about it now, it breaks my heart to even think about like, all the people that supported us. It was the most difficult time in our lives.*

Hannah described the financial support as beneficial:

*The benefit of moving home is that you save money, you know? Like what would go to rent or to food. I'm very blessed. My parents don't expect me to contribute in any way. You know, I stock the fridge because that's what I can do. But ja, for them, they say, 'stay, save, leave when you can…'. So, that's been quite beneficial.*

The emotional support that she received from her parents was also important to her:

*...and also the support you know? I found one of the challenges [at] the beginning of lockdown when I was still trying to get out of my place, and navigate back here or figure out what I was doing, it was actually quite lonely.*

Beth's mother also provided her with financial support:

*It was almost like two years of her getting used to finances of not supporting me at all to going, oh well, she's back now she's back [supporting me], plus she wants to help me, you know, get my car covered so the car doesn't get taken away, and we had to do flight tickets to Cape Town to eventually get my stuff, to pack it up, and we had to drive it up.*

**The Changes in Familial Relationships**

The move back home impacted strongly on familial relationships. It was specifically the parent-adult-child relationship that was highlighted by the participants, as it related to three areas: the parents' reaction to their adult children moving back home, increased interpersonal connection, and changes in the parent-adult child relationship.

***Parents' Reaction to Their Adult Children Moving Back Home***

Most of the participants described their parents' responses to their move as positive, but one participant reported certain expectations and pressure from her parents.

A few of the participants reported that their parents were concerned for their safety during the COVID-19 pandemic and were relieved when they returned home, or they encouraged them to return home. For example, Beth noted that

> *There was a sense of relief because if I had stayed in Cape Town, she would have been more stressed and worried…She gained a sense of control knowing her family is okay, they [were] here and we [were] safe. We not getting sick or on the street because we [got] kicked out of our house or anything.*

Denise's parents also encouraged her to return home from Doha:

> *It is difficult but, I mean, thank goodness I have supportive parents. You know, my parents said to me, 'come back home, we will look after you. Things will be okay… We want you to come home now. Are you okay? Are you safe? Just get out of Doha'.*

Hannah's parents were also relieved that she was returning home:

> *They were so supportive. I've…I've always been lucky in my parents support everything, not everything, majority of what I do, and uhm, for them, I think it gives them comfort at night like knowing that, 'Okay, you safe, you here like, for now, we know you okay'.*

Anna and Nothando indicated that their parents also expressed a positive response to their return home because their parents could connect with them. Anna described her parents as "*very excited because, during COVID last year, I think they got lonely … they both have comorbidities, so they didn't really socialise…I think the nest was full again so they were really happy about it*." Nothando also indicated that her mother was happy to have her home, "*...my mom is enjoying me being around because our, we have late sessions and early morning sessions where we will have, like a young, you know, a young mother-daughter chat…*"

Kuhle's aunt and uncle encouraged her to live with them so that they could support her:

> *... they offered so, they were, they were very open and okay to it because I mean, my aunt also, sort of, experiences the same thing… she couldn't get work…directly after*

> *finishing her studies, so, they understood, they understand, like, what I am going through.*

By contrast, some parents were stressed by the circumstances surrounding their adult children's return home. Beth explained: "*…obviously that extra financial stress…you know, she was the only one earning money at that point. So, I feel like that pressure alone on her also stressed her out, got her down, got her depressed as well….*"

Hannah explained that although her parents welcomed her home, they were disappointed because she was unable to pursue her studies overseas:

> *Um and, ja, they were quite happy. I think they were disappointed because they wanted me to leave – like not wanted me to leave but they wanted me to go overseas to further my studies because I've been wanting to do that for a very long time, and I think they saw the disappointment in me when that didn't happen.*

By comparison, Gabriella reported that her parents put pressure on her regarding future plans:

> *They would still expect my sister and I to have a plan like, what's next? Where [are] you going? Where [are] you moving to? Are you moving countries? Where [are] you going? How's it happening? Who [are] you working for?*

***Increased Interpersonal Connection***

In some instances, moving back home led to increased closeness in the family, contributing positively to the quality of familial relationships. Gabriella explained: "*I could get to know my parents more and spend some more time with them because I'm home with them all the time. They also [work] from home*."

Similarly, Nothando describes spending more time with her mother:

> *Before COVID I was never home, obviously, I had moved out but, even before I moved out it was the same pattern where I would arrive late in the evening and all I'd do is get home and sleep. So, it…it has, we have made time to spend time together. …like, before we go to bed either she comes in my room or I go into her room, we will have a […] chat, and she goes back or I go back to my room. In the morning, we [are] the first people to wake up, we have like a […] chat, you know?*

Hannah also described an increased connection and bond:

*I think that this, us being here together has really strengthened our relationship, you know? We've always had a, I don't want to say good relationship, but ja, we have but I think we've gotten closer the older we've gotten.*

Her relationship with her sister has also improved

*If I need space, she really understands my job. You know, when you just have like a horrible caller or a suicide caller, she's, she'll, she'll tell my parents, this is how we respond to this, this is what we do to help. So, she's been such a support and I'm very grateful for her even though I could kill her sometimes (laughing).*

Some of the participants described experiencing a positive impact on their relationships with their parents. For example, Anna described her relationship with her parents which was characterised as good and respectful *"...good relationship with my parents… very easy going and they respectful of my boundaries…no issues in terms of … me and them like clashing because we have mutual respect…. really get along well*." In a similar way, Kuhle's relationship with her aunt and uncle also improved, "*I mean we close now, our relationship is better, we close now. We get along very well*."

By contrast, Gabriella experienced a reduced sense of closeness:

*I just, I feel like my parents don't know me. If that makes sense, and it…it sucks because they…I feel like I also don't know them because they keep a lot of things from my sister and [me] because they think they protecting us by hiding the information from us but, in actual fact, it's like we people who live [completely] different lives, and we just know versions of each other. And that now makes it harder to try and spend time with my parents during a lockdown or those kinds of things.*

***Changes in the Parent-Adult-Child Relationship***

Some participants experienced a negative change in the dynamic of their relationship with their parents. This was explained by Hannah:

*So that whole communication aspect disappeared which is like we live together, why don't we talk? You talk more when I don't live here. So, it became more of a…you fall back into old patterns, and I think that is what I was trying to say in the beginning like that dynamic when I was a teenager now still is.*

A few participants reported increased conflict with their parents as a result of opposing beliefs and opinions. Beth described the following experience of conflict between her and her mother,

> *I get super stressed because I'm also thinking that like, I need to get a job to take the pressure off my mom…Uhm… also I'm a lot more emotional than my mom and she's very, um, can [I] say, [harder], I guess. She's like, ag, just deal with it. Suck it up and deal with it, and I'm just crying all over the and emotional… I come back, and my mom and I clashed so much. We had so many fights about just everything. I mean, the slightest thing would make us fight um… and so that was challenging.*

Gabriella also experienced conflict with her parents:

> *My parents are also [routine] creatures. They like doing the same thing again and again and again and again… and dealing with that depression, and not knowing why I'm sad, and having to now show my family who's now around me all the time, how I'm sad, and they have no idea why and have no idea how to help me or make me feel better. It caused quite a few arguments between us …*

**Perceptions of Adulthood**

The move back home affected participants' own perceptions of adulthood. Many originally defined adulthood as related to financial and psychological independence, but the move back home made them reconsider their understanding, and, in some instances, made them feel as though they were not living up to their own expectations and made them feel like a failure.

***Original Perceptions of Adulthood***

All the participants associated adulthood with independence, specifically financial and psychological independence, including being able to sustain themselves without relying on their parents to help them financially, and maintain a sense of responsibility. The experience of financial and psychological dependence and desire for independence was evident among the participants. Anna said: "*If at the end of the month, you don't have enough money to buy groceries, personally, I don't want to ask my parents. I want to make a plan…you can't always*

*rely on your parents*." This was also closely associated with psychological independence as described by Anna: "...*for me to be independent [and taking responsibility] ... being responsible for your path ahead*."

Similarly, Beth said,

> *For me [adulthood] has a lot to do [with] independence. So, if you are an adult, you are able to, you know, pay your own rent, put your own food on the table, you know? Pay your own bills.…you don't have to rely on someone else.*

Kuhle also associated adulthood with financial and psychological independence:

> *Independence for me, sadly, it's going to be financial independence. Just being able to get your own, being able to afford your own, being able to buy groceries, being able to buy toiletries…you can be independent and [stay] at home but being able to know that you can afford to buy food, to contribute to the household needs.*

Kuhle also explained that adulthood relates to being accountable and responsible for the self, "*being independent… and with that independence being responsible you know? ... Being accountable… being an adult for me is the independence, it's the accountability and the responsibility that comes with that independence.*"

Denise explained that financial independence involved the change in direction of support between her and her parents:

> *I think adulthood, for me, is a point where I can say to my parents, I'm taking you on holiday, not you taking me on holiday – a silly analogy. But it's at that point that I feel like, that I feel like, yes, I am in charge and responsible for my own responsibilities but I [am] still financially dependent on my parents. But I think when I can financially get to a place where I am able to say, 'You know what, listen. I'm okay. Can I help you now?' So, it's that shifting of help, I think where adulthood is defined for me.*

Hannah also described adulthood as being financially and psychologically independent:

> *I think being an adult is, you know, independence, of course, having your own independence, but also having responsibilities, and knowing that if you have an expense that gets paid. Your needs have to be met before your wants….*

Nothando further explained that when she "*started working obviously, ah, adulthood, adulthood started there because then when the first salary stepped in and you started getting all these phone calls with insurance shortly after, or policies, let me put it like that*."

Moreover, Gabriella described adulthood as being associated with psychological independence:

> *That's not life, no one tells you what to do. You, …you [are]on your own. It's up to you whether you wanna make the choice to be better, to do better, to have better, to make better, in those kinds of senses…And I'm like these are things that I should be making decisions for myself. I understand the care that comes [with] it but like I want to do those things for myself. I want to come home to my own house. I have to clean my own laundry. Feed my own animals. You know, do things for [me], and live in a world that's mine. Because right now, all I have is like my bedroom that's my space, that's all I have. I don't have like a kitchen that I can walk into and be like, 'I'm going to make pancakes at 3 in the morning', you know?*

In addition to associating adulthood with financial and psychological independence, some of the participants also emphasised the importance of gaining life experience that contributes to maintaining a sense of adulthood. Hannah describes it as follows:

> *And I think being an adult, is being aware of hardships and, and finding ways for yourself to help overcome it, while still holding your independence and upholding your responsibilities. So, it's kind of just navigating your way through the world until you are at a place where you like, 'Hey, I can actually do this on my own like I don't have to ask anyone for help or for money or for food.' That's adulthood. You [are] just able to survive on your own.*

Nothando explained:

> *Adulthood was never meant to be easy. It was meant to, we were meant to grow up mentally, and physically…It is, you know when we describe adulthood being like a rollercoaster, it is indeed a rollercoaster...life is just a… it's a theme. There's a lot that happens and we somehow try our best to juggle everything in our lives. We sometimes get things wrong.*

Gabriella explained that adulthood is about learning from the challenges individuals are confronted with:

> *So, you just kind of go along and ask people like, 'hey, how did you like pass this level?' and they're kind of like, 'ah, I did this' or 'that didn't work for me, what did you do?' and, you know, eventually you just get the experience enough to live as an adult and be an adult.*

### *Change in Personal Perception of Adulthood*

The impact of moving back to the parental home was accompanied by the change in the participants' perceptions of adulthood. Participants often found themselves dependent on their parents. Nothando describes it as follows:

> *Asking my own mom or dad for data for me that's… I mean data is, we use data every day, and for me to ask my mom, 'please buy me data' … I would feel like a disappointment but it's a disappointment that is out of my control.*

Gabriella also describes an ambivalent experience of adulthood while living with her parents and having her own job:

> *[I]t feels like I am an adult, I pay taxes, I go to work like, you know, I do boxing for my fitness because I don't have school sports anymore. So, ja, I'm, I'm trying like my best to be an adult but at the same time they [are] also still my parents and I'm still their little baby so, they going to treat me like their little baby.*

Denise also experienced a change in her perception of herself as an adult:

> *Yes, absolutely. So, I think it's a thing of, it's a thing of... like I say, me, I'm reliant on them for a house, a roof over my head, and hot water you know? But when I'm able to do that for myself and not have to worry that, you know, I need to rely on someone to do these things, then I'm an adult. And, yes, I am an adult now but I'm still, we can use the inverted commas 'young adult'.*

In the instance of Hannah, she did not experience a change in her sense of independence:

> *I'm still independent, in the sense that I pay for everything I need myself, umm, you know, I have my own job, my own working hours, like my…, even though it's my room that's now my office because my parents like work in the office. Umm, I still have the sense, this is me, this is my life, this is my path, and right now, I'm just living here.*

### *Feeling Like a Failure*

As a result of the changes in their sense of independence some, some participants felt like a failure. Anna said:

> *People like ask you like when are you having children or when are you getting married… those societal expectations bother me… there is a lot more pressure and sometimes it feels very hard to be an adult…adulthood is quite hard… there's just so much more pressure on you, financially and expectation wise, and like societal wise.*

She also compared herself to her peers:

> *I tell myself, 'you a loser', … sometimes I can't help but feel like a loser because I see other people my age having a second child…If I see like, people my age, like…let's say investing in property in South Africa, I've never wanted to do that and I don't want to but the fact that they have their own home that they have bought with their own money and they settling…they're my age or they're younger than… and they have accomplished so much and then you think that when I get my first job, that allows me to, I should just move out, get my own apartment but in thinking about that now…*

Gabriella shared similar sentiments: "*I think there [are] a lot of expectations from society on who an adult is and what they are capable of and what they are supposed to be and, you can just do whatever you want.* "

**The Effect on the Family Cycle**

The move back home not only influenced participants' understanding of what it means to be an adult but it also had an impact on the developmental and family life cycle. This was evident in the participants' comments on the disruption in the family life cycle and a stagnation in personal development.

***Disruption of the Family Life Cycle***

The fact that participants found themselves living at home as young adults resulted in a disruption in the family life cycle.

Anna had successfully launched herself prior to the pandemic – she explained: "*I was in my own home for a year and a half… COVID cancelled all my plans, so I moved back in with my parents.*"

Similarly, Beth had launched herself successfully and lived in the Cape, but then, she "*literally caught the last flight out to Johannesburg.*" Beth experienced particular difficulty progressing through the family cycle,

> *...because that's sometimes what it feels like [I'm 18 years old] ... I mean it's scary to think I'm only four or five years away from 30... that scares me because I'm like, whoa, I don't have anything sorted in terms of my finances.*

Denise also returned home after living independently: "*COVID hit and you literally had to go back home. I had to pack up everything on that side again and come back to South Africa*."

Gabriella was unable to emigrate as planned and found herself living at home with her parents: "*So, I just decided to stay at home.*"

***Stagnation in Personal Development***

The majority of the participants experienced a sense of stagnation and felt they were not progressing according to social expectations. Denise commented as follows:

> *A lot of people that I know have actually had to downsize or go back a few steps in life, you know? You kinda look at life as a normal natural progression – you get your degree, you get your own place, you get married, [and] you have kids. I mean that's maybe just a more generalised version of reality but that's kind of the natural inclination. COVID hit and it was like, well now take three steps back, go back home, you know? ... I feel like life is this constant up and down, up and down, and I think COVID made that cycle go completely faster or it changed the complete trajectory of a lot of people's lives.*

Other participants felt that they had regressed into adolescence. Anna explains feeling "*like a teenager stuck inside [her] body.*" Beth described feeling like an adolescent, despite being in her mid-twenties: "…*that's sometimes what it feels like [I'm 18 years old]*." Hannah also expressed similar feelings:

> *...moving home, I feel like you fall back into that responsibility of when you were a teenager or a child, and the dynamic of how that relationship with your parents works. So, for like example, [my sister and I] make dinner or lunch because my parents both work.*

A number of participants expressed that they were unable to progress because of their financial dependence on their parents. For example, Anna lamented: "*I'm still living with my parents, like why am I not at least married with my own home?*" Beth also experienced

stagnation: "*And if, if I sit now and look to the future, I'm like well maybe when I'm 60 I could [support my mom] but by that point, she's not gonna be around because the economy and everything is stacked against us.*"

Kuhle felt that the lack of progression was influenced by her family's expectations:

> *I was expecting to have some direction you know? And now that I'm not doing anything, I'm not studying, I feel like I don't have any direction. I know where I wasn't to be but things are just not happening to me feel like I'm heading [in] this direction.*

Similarly, Gabriella also felt like she was not progressing:

> *Uhm, but my biggest change with COVID happening so, just before COVID happened, I had just finished my BA and my Honours degree so, after that I was planning on moving overseas too, I don't know, go do something, find work, go live my best like, you know? And then it happened, and I couldn't go anywhere...*

Hannah felt stuck physically because of the situation:

> *I can't make a plan because we went from lockdown to [waiting] for the next announcement, and then the next announcement came, and then it's [waiting] for the next announcement. So, it's also that you feel stuck in I can't move forward and I can't go back. You know, like what must I do?*

**Conclusion**

This chapter has described the different themes and sub-themes identified in the data analysis. Overall, the move back home affected all the participants in different ways. While there were many challenges related to their sense of adulthood and financial and psychological independence, there was also evidence that familial relationships deepened as a result of more connection. The impact on the family life cycle was also evident as children who had previously launched themselves into adulthood returned home. In the next chapter, I explore these themes further and compare the findings of this study to the relevant literature. I also consider how these findings relate to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

## Introduction

Thematic analysis of the collected data revealed vital findings relating to the research questions that were posed at the beginning of the study. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath are still yielding research pertaining to the impact of the pandemic on different aspects of life across the globe, including its impact on schoolchildren, the challenges of lockdown and quarantine, as well as the psychological impact that COVID and the lockdown has had on families, and on individuals' mental health. Although there are several international studies relating to the adult child moving back home because of the financial global recession in 2008, there has thus far been only a limited amount of research on adult children and their experiences of moving back home because of the pandemic, especially in the South African context. Therefore, this study contributes to research concerning the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in South Africa by specifically exploring the psychological impact on adult children of moving back to the parental home because of the financial consequences of the pandemic.

The following research questions were posed at the beginning of the study: What factors contributed to adult children's decision to return to the parental home following lockdown restrictions? How has the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences affected the psychological well-being of adult children? How did adult children cope with the psychological impact of moving back home because of the consequences of the lockdown?

The findings that emerged from the data analysis provided a range of answers to the above questions. Firstly, the data analysis suggests that the participants returned home mainly because of the impact of the South African and global lockdowns on their employability and ability to be financially independent. The participants faced various employment challenges

such as a loss of their jobs, the adjustment of job descriptions, which resulted in diminished work roles and reduced salaries, difficulty in finding employment, and an inability to emigrate overseas to further tertiary level studies and/or to secure employment opportunities.

Consequently, four of the seven participants moved back to their parental home because of the economic impact of work limitations which hindered these participants from sustaining themselves financially and being independent. By contrast, three of the seven participants initially moved home because of other factors, including a decision to return home in light of uncertainty surrounding the national lockdown in South Africa, and delays in emigration because of the closure of international borders and travel restrictions.

This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the data more fully, in order to answer this study's research questions. The themes presented in the previous chapter are considered in the context of the current literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and their families against the backdrop of the Family Life Cycle theory.

**The Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Employment**

Pandemics and epidemics have a significant impact on the economy because they influence the level of economic activity – there is a decrease in productivity and labour movement, which in turn leads to socioeconomic changes and influences individuals (Malik et al., 2022). This effect is evident in the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had severe economic implications globally, because of the restrictions and regulations that most governments implemented to curb the spread of the virus (Martin et al., 2020). In particular, Martin et al. (2020) highlight the economic decline across the world in both developed and developing economies, including those of the United States of America, and countries in Europe and South-East Asia. Most countries around the world experienced a decrease in their gross domestic product because of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on

various sectors, such as education and the hospitality, finance, and manufacturing sectors (Malik et al., 2022). The pandemic increased unemployment rates significantly (Fernandes, 2020).

Locally, the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe negative impact on the South African labour market, causing increased poverty as a result of the South African government's response to COVID-19, which involved implementing a national lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. The harsh restrictions influenced the labour market and resulted in the closing down of many businesses and a loss of jobs, as well as underemployment (Odeku, 2021; Schotte & Zizzamia, 2023). The marked loss of employment is evident in a 40% decrease in active employment among working adults between February and April 2020 (Jain et al., 2020). This impact is reflected in the findings of this study, which show that participants' employment was deeply affected by the pandemic. A number of participants lost their jobs as a result of the lockdown. The loss of employment among these participants was related to the industry in which they were employed. Some of them worked in entertainment and tourism, which were two sectors of the economy that were especially affected, with a severe economic impact, as the hospitality, tourism, aviation, retail, entertainment, travel, and construction industries are considered major contributors to the economy (Kochhar & Barroso, 2020; Burns, 2020; Debata et al., 2020; Fernandes, 2020). One participant lost her employment in the aviation industry, which was particularly hard hit by the significant difficulties and financial impact of travel restrictions and the closure of borders implemented by governments across the world to contain the spread COVID-19 (Nicola et al., 2020). According to Nicola et al. (2020), the hospitality and travel industries were considered to be the most severely impacted industries, resulting in significant challenges for employees of these industries.

Employment was also altered by the introduction of reduced working hours and reduced income even for many who remained employed during the pandemic (Jain et al.,

2020). The data in this study, which found that some participants experienced diminished work roles, is consistent with a survey which was conducted by Statistics South Africa (2020b) and which describes diminished work roles among South Africans, finding that 21,3% of the survey respondents reported maintaining employment, but with a salary reduction. Diminished work roles had a negative impact on the salaries of participants in the current study, in line with other South Africans who reported reduced salaries because of reduced working hours (Statistics South Africa, 2020b).

The impact of COVID-19 on employment was evident among young adults who were about to enter the labour market at the start of the pandemic. In the United States, the population group most at risk of being unemployed was young workers (Kochhar & Barroso, 2020). A review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on India's citizens, its economy, and environment, revealed that the impact of the pandemic on the economy had further implications for graduates who had just completed their studies, or were completing their final year of study, as the condition of the economy made it challenging for these young adults to enter the professional work environment because of the decrease in economic activity (Debata et al., 2020). In Africa, young people experienced multiple challenges as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, including disrupted education, training, and learning; loss of employment and income because of retrenchment and reduced working hours; and overall difficulties securing employment (ITU, 2023).

In South Africa, employment possibilities for young people were also significantly affected by the lockdown restrictions, limiting them in their pursuit of education, training, and employment (UCT GSB, 2023). Statistics South Africa (2021b) found that young people aged 15 to 34 years experienced difficulty securing employment during this period. The graduate unemployment rate among those who were aged 25 to 34 years increased to 22,4%, and the graduate unemployment rate among young people aged 15 to 24 years was 32,6%

(Statistics South Africa, 2022a). The challenges described above for young people who experienced difficulty in education, training, and securing employment was reflected in the experiences of the participants in the current study, as some of them also experienced difficulty securing employment after graduating.

Employment possibilities in South Africa were further negatively affected by the economic challenges that already existed in South Africa prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and that also influencing emigration trends. Emigration among South Africans is an continuing but increasing pattern in South Africa, especially evident among the middle-class (BusinessTech, 2022). The reasons for emigrating to other countries include the increased unemployment rate. This is particularly attractive to skilled individuals (Joubert & Fourie, 2002). Furthermore, people emigrate to access improved living standards in the host country, fuelling the growth of the host country's economy and resulting in increased employment opportunities (Joubert & Fourie, 2002). The data from this study are in line with this trend, as several participants reported that they wished to migrate overseas for better employment and educational opportunities, considering the economic circumstances in South Africa. For example, Anna mentioned her motive to emigrate, saying, "*[my boyfriend and I] aren't really happy in South Africa so, he decided that he wanted to go back to South Korea for the period um... up until we get our Canadian residency*."

However, the COVID-19 pandemic also made it difficult to migrate for work/educational purposes because of the travel restrictions and regulations implemented by various governments. These included the closing of borders, bans on entering and exiting countries, the suspension of transport and visas, and specific procedures upon entry into a country, such as quarantine and screenings (Gwee et al., 2021). The impact of these travel restrictions was evident in the experiences of a few of the participants, who had planned to emigrate. For example, Anna's application outcome for residency in Canada was extended.

Similarly, Hannah was also affected by travel restrictions which prevented her from moving to Europe to further her postgraduate studies.

As a result of the impact of COVID-19 on employment, participants often had to rely on savings to meet financial responsibilities such as car instalments and, in many instances, they were not able to maintain financial independence. The long-term impact of COVID has affected and is predicted to continue to affect South Africa's economic growth, resulting in loss of jobs, higher morbidity and mortality, decreasing human capital, worsening already weak economic growth (Hao et al., 2023). Hence, even in the first and second years of the pandemic, South Africa's economic growth was expected to decrease, with a slow recovery, further exacerbating challenges relating to unemployment, inequality, and poverty (Odeku, 2021; UNDP, 2020). The findings of the current study are consistent with these predictions, as participants shared that they struggled to sustain themselves because of the economic difficulties they experienced as a result of the pandemic.

Lastly, given that all the participants were female, the economic downturn may have made them more vulnerable to unemployment, as they form part of vulnerable groups – these include women, informal workers, and minimal-income earners (Rogan & Skinner 2020; Van Barneveld et al., 2020). Casale and Shepherd (2021) also highlight the challenges of unemployment among women who experienced job loss and reduced working hours during COVID, as well as a slower recovery rate in comparison to their male counterparts (also see Casale & Posel, 2020).

**Changes in Familial Relationships**

When adult children return to live in the parental home, this may influence the family system, resulting in changes between members of the family, which may affect the family system positively or negatively (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). When adult children

move back home, parents may respond positively or negatively, depending on the perceived impact the children's return home may have on the parents (Tosi & Grundy, 2018). For example, research done before COVID by Aquilino (1996, as cited in Gitelson & McDermott, 2006) suggests that parents whose adult children return home may experience this negatively. COVID-19 led to different socio-economic circumstances: it created exceptional circumstances that surrounded the move home for adult children.

In this study, most of the participants' parents' reaction to their children moving back home was described as positive. Nothando indicated that her "*mom is enjoying [Nothando] being around*". Parents' reactions to their adult children returning home included encouraging the participants to move home, experiencing excitement, and feeling relieved to have adult children home. This may be because parents perceived their children as requiring more support from them beyond their late adolescence and into early adulthood (Furstenberg, 2010), especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic consequences of the pandemic. The parent-adult-child relationship develops and often involves an exchange of support, as adult children may also provide their parents with various forms of support (Merz et al., 2009). Therefore, parents may also perceive their adult children leaving home as a disadvantage. It may result in reduced quality time with their children because of geographical distances and the demands of the adult child's life, which may contribute to parents' feeling less emotionally close to their children, and reducing the support that adult children can offer their parents (Aquilino, 1997).

Although all the participants perceived their parents' responses as positive, one participant reported that her parents also demonstrated specific expectations around her establishing herself despite the pandemic and the circumstances. This participant experienced pressure:

> *They would still expect my sister and I to have a plan like, what's next? Where [are] you going? where [are] you moving to? Are you moving countries? Where [are] you going? How's it happening? Who [are] you working for?*

Any negative reactions expressed by these parents may have been influenced by feelings of disappointment when adult children had to return home, and possibly by a perception that these adult children had failed to establish themselves as adults, resulting in further dependency on parents (Caputo, 2019). Disappointment may also have been due to the perception that an adult child returning home is violating a social norm that adult children are expected to leave home early in their adulthood (Hartung & Sweeney, 1991).

Emotional support may have also been experienced through increased interpersonal connections between adult children and their parents. Closeness in the parent-child relationship is described as the extent to which, at a behavioural and emotional level, children and their parents are connected (Laursen & Collins, 2009). The current study found that many participants experienced moving back home as increasing closeness and strengthening relationships within the family. Kuhle depicted this in the following way: "*I mean we [are] close now, our relationship is better, we close now. We get along very well*." This was achieved through increased time spent together during the COVID-19 pandemic. Government regulations and restrictions restricted people's movements; most families were required to confine themselves to their homes. While confinement may have restricted social engagement with the outside world (Wegner et al., 2022), it was also a mechanism that helped strengthen relationships within the family (Ayuso et al., 2020; Mahlangu et al., 2022).

Additionally, the increased closeness and strengthening of the relationships between the participants and their parents may have been an opportunity for parents and adult children to re-establish their bonds. The transition to adulthood can be challenging for young people and can influence the maintenance of contact and bonds with their parents. The transition can result in a decline in closeness when adult children move out to establish their autonomy and

independence (Fang et al., 2021). Even though the return of adult children to the home may have contributed to an increase in conflict (Fang et al., 2021), the closeness and strengthening of relationships described by participants in this study may be understood in terms of the closer bond that has been described between co-residing adult children and parents when the adult child is striving for independence (Furstenberg, 2010).

In some cases, a closer bond may also have been the result of the support adult children provided their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the exchange of support experienced between adult children and parents (Gilligan et al., 2020) and the interdependence of the parent-adult-child relationship (Trommsdorff, 2006). However, it is vital to consider that the solidarity between parents and adult children may be evaluated differently by both parents and adult children for reasons such as the structural positions within society that place one party in dependence on the other party, and the similarity between the social positions that both parents and adult children maintain (Shapiro, 2004).

The findings of the current study suggest some changes in the parent-adult relationship. Two of the participants experienced a change in the dynamic of their relationship with their parents in the form of regression and conflict. Hannah provided some insight into this dynamic:

> *[S]o that whole communication aspect disappeared which is like we live together, why don't we talk? You talk more when I don't live here. So, it became more of a…, you fall back into old patterns, and I think that is what I was trying to say in the beginning like that dynamic when I was a teenager now still is.*

This experience is consistent with Hartung and Sweeney's (1991) finding that the adult child and parent dynamic changes when adult children move home, particularly where behaviours were controlled and monitored because adult children were perceived as adolescents, as the adult children reported. Therefore, parents were more likely to engage with their adult children as (younger) children, resulting in a regression to childhood patterns of interaction when the adult children moved home (Sassler et al., 2008).

When the participants reported that when they moved back home their parents perceived them to be children, this may have occurred because these young adults had not been able to attain a critical milestone that would allow the family to progress to the next life stage (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011), causing a disruption in the family life cycle. This may be reflected in most participants' experience of living with their parents again, suggesting that their return disrupted the family life cycle because they failed to launch into adulthood or were unable to progress, and there was a delay in their meeting specific "milestones" for adulthood. As a result, the participants felt a sense of stagnation in their personal development, and sometimes even a sense of regression, which may have reflected some of their relationships with their parents. The parents may also have been responding to a "regression" in terms of family life cycle staged, as the launching stage is often considered a vital stage of the family life cycle, and it is accompanied by several challenges that require the family to be a source of support for a young adult (Wulaningsih & Krisnatuti, 2019). Once the launching stage is achieved, the parents in a family may experience an empty nest and progress into the stage of middle-aged parents (Poon & Bader, 2014). Consequently, when adult children are unable to progress and that launch does not occur, as the children remain dependent and reliant on their parents (Lebowitz, 2016), this may require parents to reverse out of the middle-aged stage and (re)assume a parenting role to support their children.

Traditional family systems have evolved over time which usually take the pattern on marriage, fertility, parenting, the exercise of certain parenting styles, and co-residence with children (Furstenberg, 2010). Patterns evident in the transition to adulthood have also shifted from an early and simple transition to a late and more complex transition (Van den Berg et al., 2019). The transition to adulthood can now be characterised by the acquisition of further education, working, and pursuing educational goals simultaneously, shifting between independent living and living in the parental home, and delaying marriage (Furstenberg et al.,

2004). Therefore, traditional stages of the family life cycle may be evolving to include a stage of "emerging adult", considering the cultural and social changes occurring within society. For example, young people may choose to pursue educational and occupational opportunities (Arnett, 2000), before "launching". Considering "emerging adulthood" may be appropriate because it allows young individuals the autonomy and freedom to explore several opportunities and life paths (Arnett, 2000).

**Individual Experiences Moving Back Home**

Participants' moving back to their parental homes was expected to alter the family dynamic. In order to understand this experience, it is critical to consider the definition of the family and how it can differ in a South African context. The Western view of a family centres on the nuclear family in comparison to the African perspective of a family, which is inclusive of the extended family including aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins (Siqwana-Ndulo, 1998). The structure of South African families also varies greatly. It includes female-headed homes, child-headed homes, and intergenerational living (Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016). Furthermore, the family can also consist of extended family members providing care for children whose parents are unable to care for their children (Hall & Mokomane, 2018). Therefore, this study considered adult children who moved back home, but this did not necessarily mean their parental home – it could also include other relevant parental figures in the participants' lives.

In order to understand the participants' experience of moving back to the parental home, it is vital to understand their perception of adulthood. This study found that adulthood was perceived as maintaining financial and psychological independence. In particular, it was defined by the participants as maintaining a sense of responsibility and the ability to make decisions, which is consistent with the literature, which has highlighted the transition to

adulthood as occurring when individuals achieve the milestone of leaving the parental home to establish their independence, both financially and socially (Gillespie, 2020). This was illustrated by Beth who explained the importance of financial independence:

> *[F]or me [adulthood] has a lot to do [with] independence. So, if you are an adult, you are able to, you know, pay your own rent, put your own food on the table, you know? Pay your own bills.…you don't have to rely on someone else.*

Responsibility was also associated with psychological independence, as Hannah explained:

> *I think being an adult is, you know, independence, of course, having your own independence, but also having responsibilities, and knowing that if you have an expense that gets paid. Your needs have to be met before your wants…*

This study found that the perception of adulthood changed when the participants moved back to the family home. An ambivalent experience of adulthood was evident, in that participants were considered adults in terms of their age, but they faced challenges that may have shifted their perceptions of adulthood. For example, the majority of the participants again became dependent on their parental figures for financial support and housing, which may have contradicted their perception of adulthood. This finding is consistent with that of Burn and Szoeke (2015), who identified a number of specific challenges experienced by adult children when they moved back to the family home, including maintaining their status as adults, which was found to be challenging for adult children who had been previously independent (Burn & Szoeke, 2015). Difficulty in maintaining adult status may also be influenced by the exchange of support between the adult child and their parents. Trommsdorff (2006) argues that the parent-child relationship consists of boundaries, independence, and interdependence when children become adults. However, the participants' move back home may have hindered changes and transitions in the exchange of support.

Returning home resulted in two of the participants' sense of "*feeling like a failure*". These participants related the experience of failure to the difficulty of reaching the

expectations around adulthood established in society. Anna describes this sense: "*I tell myself, 'You a loser,…*'." A sense of failure may be informed by difficulties attaining a critical indicator marking a person's transition into adulthood, such as living independently and establishing a home separately from that of their parents. Hartung and Sweeney (1991) suggest that people who are unable to establish their adulthood in this form may feel they are violating a societal norm, causing a sense of failure.

The participants' return home influenced their perception of themselves as adults mainly because they experienced a loss of independence. Most had lived alone and were forced to move back home by the circumstances, resulting in a loss of financial independence and of autonomy because they again became dependent on their parents financially and instrumentally. Independence refers to the "freedom from the influence or control of other individuals or groups" (APA, 2023). In addition, independence requires that an individual be able to make decisions on which they can follow through by actioning their decisions alone; it requires the ability to assume responsibility for consequences associated with the action; and the confidence that the action is moral, practical, and socially acceptable (Kon, 1985).

An additional prerequisite for a sense of independence may be for a person to complete the process of individuation successfully. Individuation is a developmental pathway that involves becoming self-representative and separating from one's parents to establish new relationships external to the family that one can rely on, and establishing a new, mature relationship with one's parents (Andersen, 2000). The process of individuation may be further supported when one achieves a critical milestone for adulthood, such as transitioning to living independently (Wood et al., 2017). Therefore, moving back home coupled with the experience of financial dependence on their parents may have resulted for some of the participants in difficulty individuating from their parents.

This study found that participants experienced a loss of personal space and privacy when moving back home. Personal space refers to the unseen boundaries and limits that encircle a person in that person's environment (Litkouhi et al., 2012). Therefore, personal space operates as a protective factor regulating the relations and interactions someone has with others (Horner, 1983). A critical mechanism to maintain personal space is privacy (Horner, 1983), which is valued as a self-evident right within the family (Bauwens et al., 2020). Maintaining personal space requires control over boundaries and limits. Therefore, if people are unable to maintain control over their personal space, this could result in a lack of privacy, and may negatively impact their ability to regulate their interactions with others (Al-Homoud, 2009).

It may be difficult to meet the need for personal space and privacy when there is limited space (Gwandure, 2010). A loss of personal space may then result in the experience of psychological distress (Brown et al., 2005; Childress, 2004, as cited by Gwandure, 2010). This may be the result of a loss of control and freedom to choose who has access to the person (Altman, 1975, 1976). This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when family relationships experienced strain as a result of the increased time together and sharing common spaces within the home, which may have also contributed to the experience of conflict within the family (October et al., 2022) and may have influenced participants' ability to regulate and control their interactions with others based on their preference or desire for interaction, as described by Altman (1975). However, most of the participants who reported difficulty with a lack of personal space and privacy were white South African participants. White South African families of Western European descent tend to maintain an individualistic culture that values independence, privacy, and separate living (Burch, 1995), in comparison to some black South African families, who may prefer to maintain a

collectivist culture, which values interdependence, and specifically reciprocation (Mabandla et al., 2022).

A lack of privacy and space during the COVID-19 pandemic was found to influence romantic relationships. Two of the participants mentioned that a lack of personal space and privacy affected their ability to navigate intimacy in their romantic relationships while living in their parental home. Anna complained, "*you have to wait, to wait for parents to go to sleep, wait for parents to go out and it's like I'm sneaking around like a naughty teenager*." This finding is in line with other Western research, which also found that people experienced a lack of privacy because they were working and schooling from home, which negatively influenced intimacy among couples (Löfgren et al., 2023).

Despite the experience of a lack of privacy and space, the COVID-19 pandemic was also accompanied by feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Gabriella described this as follows: "*[I]t's been challenging because it's not even like I can go out with some friends …I felt very isolated*." Several other South African studies found that people experienced loneliness (Porter et al., 2021; Salari et al., 2020; Swart et al., 2022; Wegner et al., 2022) because of the restrictions which were imposed on their movements, and which were found to contribute to social isolation (Hwang et al., 2020).

People's mental health and well-being were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. in particular, an increase in anxiety-related and depressive symptoms has been observed across the globe (Porter et al., 2021; Salari et al., 2020). South African studies have also explored the influence of the pandemic's economic, psychological, and social consequences as a contributor to the onset of anxiety, mood disorders, and stress. These studies found that South Africans experienced anxiety, anger, sleep difficulties, hopelessness, isolation (Swart et al., 2022), and loneliness, and dissatisfaction with life (Pretorius & Padmanabhanunni, 2021).

Another South African study found that people reported a depressed mood in response to unemployment (Hunt, Breet et al., 2021).

The current research study found that most of the participants experienced anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms in response to returning home. Symptoms included feeling anxious, depressed and sad, a sense of guilt, hopelessness, and helplessness, and levels of stress that affected physical health. These findings are in line with those of Burn and Szoeke's (2015) study from prior to the pandemic, which reported that adult children tend to experience depressive symptoms when they feel that their personal development has been hindered because of moving back home (Burn & Szoeke, 2015). Bowen (1978) suggested when people experience symptoms that contribute to dysfunction within an individual, this may be attributed to difficulty with self-differentiation, which then manifests as anxiety within a family system that has been disrupted by an adult child's moving back home.

Furthermore, most participants experienced anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic – they feared that they or their loved ones would contract the virus, or that they would infect their loved ones. This reflected the experience of South Africans at large who feared being infected with the virus (Davey, 2020) The current study found that participants used similar strategies to maintain their well-being, in line with what was suggested by the WHO (2020) guidelines at the time. For example, participants reported keeping busy and being proactive, praying, and self-reflecting to gain increased self-awareness, and attempting to maintain a positive perspective.

Despite some of the more negative aspects, there were also some benefits linked to moving back home which included the emotional and/or financial support that parents were able to provide their adult children. Denise described her parents as supportive: "*We will look after you and financially support you…They were very supportive [of] me coming back home*." The literature has shown that adult children may decide to move back home when

they are confronted with economic difficulties and require financial assistance (Dey & Pierret, 2014; Hartung & Sweeney, 1991; Hess, 2022). However, this does not remove the feelings of failure that adult children may experience when moving back home. In this regard, Venutolo-Mantovani (2021) argues that adult children may experience moving home both negatively and positively, suggesting that adult children may experience embarrassment and shame when they are receiving financial assistance, but that the parental home may be a source of safety and security for adult children in response to adverse life events. A similar view is expressed by Swartz et al. (2011), who found that parental support and the ability to move back into the family home was considered a safety net and scaffolding for young adult children during life challenges. Thus, adult children may experience the parental home as a safe environment for them to return to when they experience challenges in assuming adult roles, or encounter job losses or the end of significant relationships (Aquilino 1996, as cited in Gitelson & McDermott, 2006; Dykstra et al., 2013), or divorce (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989), suggesting that adult children may perceive the home and their parents as emotionally supportive.

## Conclusion

The study sought to explore the factors that contributed to adult children's return home in the face of lockdown restrictions, the individual experiences of the adult child moving back home, and how the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences affected the psychological well-being of adult children. The study found that adult children returned home mainly as a result of the economic challenges that they experienced as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a national lockdown with strict regulations and restrictions to contain the virus. Participants lost their jobs, or their work roles were reduced, with a concomitant drop in salary, or they could not secure employment. Some were

prevented from emigrating for work and study opportunities. Participants were unable to maintain independent living and to meet all their financial responsibilities.

The findings of the study suggest that several adult children may have experienced moving back home negatively. The findings showed that participants associated moving back home with a loss of independence, which led to a sense of failure and of stagnation because the participants felt that they had not progressed, hindering their personal development. In addition to the loss of independence, participants also described a loss of personal space and privacy when they moved back home. Specifically, participants in romantic relationships struggled to navigate intimacy with their partners. Some participants also described experiencing loneliness and isolation because of social isolation, as they were unable to socialise with friends.

All the participants' mental health was affected by moving home and the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported depressive symptoms including sadness, difficulty sleeping, hopelessness, and helplessness. Symptoms of anxiety were also evident and related to anxiety about the virus, including contracting COVID-19 and infecting loved ones, stress and uncertainty about the future. Thus, it is evident that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and moving back home had a psychological impact on the participants.

Despite the above negative experiences of moving home, there were also positive aspects to moving back home, such as financial and emotional support that adult children received from their parents. This may have also been a protective factor for the adult children. The data suggest that most parents responded positively to their adult children moving back home. Several encouraged their adult children to return home and felt relieved when adult children did return home. The participants also reported an increase in interpersonal closeness and contact between adult children and their parents when adult children moved back home, which had a positive impact on the parent-adult-child

relationship in this study. Nevertheless, it was also found that the dynamic of the parent-adult-child relationship changed when adult children moved home. For example, some participants experienced regression into adolescent roles which led to a disruption of the family system because of a “reversal” in the family life cycle.

The final chapter of this dissertation focused on the relevance of the findings in this study, outlines the limitations of the study and suggests possible directions for future research.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

## Key Findings and Contribution

This research study aimed to contribute to the growing literature about the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on people's lives. Because the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is vast, this research study focused on the experiences of young adults who experienced financial difficulties, resulting in a need to move back to their parents. The study wanted to explore specifically their experience of moving back home, the impact of the move on their relationship with their parents or parental figures in the family system, and the psychological impact of the move.

The findings of this study highlight the economic impact of the pandemic, which resulted in the instability of employment across different industries, both internationally and locally (Malik et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2020). This was particularly the case in South Africa, where the already high unemployment rate prior to the pandemic was worsened when the national lockdown was implemented (Statistics South Africa, 2022b), restricting economic activity (Arndt et al., 2020; RSA, 2022b). Thus, job losses, decreased wages and salaries, and the inability to secure employment were prominent themes in the data. The instability of the economy exacerbated employment difficulties, which posed financial challenges. This was considered a factor that resulted in participants' adjusting their living arrangements. Adult children perceived their parents' and parental figures' responses to their returning home as positive and, in some cases, they were encouraged to return home to keep them safe in the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the return of the adult children provided an opportunity for adult children and their parents to increase their interpersonal connection. Some adult children also reported a change in the parent-adult-children dynamic, and some

felt that they were regressing back to adolescence. However, overall, these adult children experience their parents or parental figures as emotionally and financially supportive.

The study further revealed that adult children experienced moving home as mostly negative, despite the benefits they gained from returning home. This was mainly the result of difficulty maintaining their adult status – they felt they lost their independence because they were unable to maintain independent living and became reliant on their parents or parental figures for financial and instrumental support. Adult children also experienced a loss of privacy and personal space upon their return home. They specifically experienced difficulty navigating and maintaining their romantic relationships related to intimacy with their partners. Psychologically, the return home fuelled feelings of failure and stagnation in their personal development, relating to their achievement of specific milestones associated with adulthood. This had a negative effect on the mental health and well-being of adult children, and led to depressive symptoms. Adult children experienced anxiety-related symptoms and stress in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and virus. Specifically, adult children feared that they would test positive for COVID-19 and possibly infect their loved ones (a particular problem if their loved ones' immune systems were already compromised prior to the pandemic). In addition, uncertainty surrounding their future contributed to anxiety.

**Limitations**

It is critical to consider the limitations of this study in order to ensure that future research studies of this nature can be improved.

The first limitation is the sample size of this study. The study was able to recruit only seven participants. As a result, the depth and breadth of the information gathered may have been limited. Although data saturation was achieved, additional participants might have

yielded a more in-depth understanding and insight into the complexities of the experience and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the adult child.

Secondly, there was limited diversity among the participants in terms of gender and race, despite using various strategies to ensure a heterogenous sample. The sample consisted only female participants and lacked male participation. The fact that female participants were apparently more willing to take part in the research study is consistent with other studies that have found women to be more willing to be research participants comparison to men (Curtin et al., 2000; Moore & Tarnai, 2002). Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the sample was compromised by the lack of diversity in terms of the participants' race. Most of the sample were white South Africans, and there were only two black South African participants. Therefore, the findings of this study may not be fully inclusive or representative of the experiences of adult children from all South African demographic groups such as black South Africans, Coloured South Africans, and Indian South Africans.

The third limitation of this study was the fact that the interviews were conducted on an online platform. Although conducting interviews online has several benefits, online interviews also posed several challenges. These challenges included difficulty with the audibility of participants, resulting in impaired communication; connectivity issues; and the potential exclusion of lower income groups and people with a lower education (Akyirem et al., 2023). In South Africa, it has been found that 50% of the population does not have access to online platforms (Gillwald et al., 2018). The price of data is high, which means that 47% of the South African population does not have access to the internet (Gillwald et al., 2018). This meant that potential participants from lower socioeconomic groups may not have access to the internet, data, and devices to participate in online interviews. This may have further limited the heterogeneity of the sample in this study.

A fourth limitation of the study involved the lack of parental participation, resulting in the lack of parental insight into the experience of adult children moving home in the South African context. It has been found that the relationship between parents and adult children is evaluated differently by both parents and adult children for reasons such as the structural positions within society that place one party in dependence on the other party, and the similarity between the social positions that both parents and adult children maintain (Shapiro, 2004). However, Shapiro (2004) found a high level of agreement between parents and adult children when evaluating the parent-adult-child relationship.

Lastly, a final limitation of the study is the disparity of power between myself as the researcher and the participants. This disparity may have influenced the data collection and analysis for this study. This may have been affected by my positionality, as I experienced similar circumstances to those of the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, my personal experiences may have influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data. However, I engaged in reflexivity to ensure qualitative rigour, as far as possible, in an attempt to mitigate any personal biases.

**Recommendations**

Despite the limitations of this study, it is hoped that it will contribute to the growing research on a global event, the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact. Additionally, this study has highlighted the significance of the family structure and the vital role that family plays in an individual's life, especially during critical life events such as a pandemic. Subsequently, this study revealed that there is a need for interdependence between people, as it provides a sense of security and support for individuals when they experience adversity and life challenges. The study has found evidence on discrepancies between the traditional Family Life Cycle model and calls for its applicability to be considered carefully in relation to the

context of each individual. Several possibilities for further exploration of this topic became evident when this study was conducted.

Considering the limitations of the sample size and characteristics, it may be valuable to explore this topic by investigating the impact of adult children moving back home among lower-income groups where the adult child is responsible for maintaining the family's financial well-being. Specifically, it would be useful to explore the psychological impact of returning home on black South African adult children to provide insight into the nuances of the African family such as the so-called “black tax”.

Given that the sample was made up of female participants, aiming this study toward male participants may be beneficial in increasing understanding of the psychological impact of moving back home on men, considering the complexities of masculinity in society, the role of male adult children in the family, and any different dynamics that male adult children may maintain with their parents.

Although the focus of this study was on the adult child’s experiences, significant insight would be gained from understanding the parental perspectives of adult children’s return home and how these perceptions may affect the adult child. Furthermore, it would be valuable to understand the participants’ parents’ perspective of closeness and the strengthening of familial relationships to obtain an accurate reflection of the interpersonal closeness and connection experienced.

Overall, further exploration of this topic may facilitate a holistic understanding of the experiences of adult children through the lens of the Family Life Cycle and the Family System theories to illuminate the impact on the family which may contribute to the psychological difficulties that an individual may experience to help inform culturally appropriate family therapy.

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# Appendix A:

## Consent Form, Participant Information Sheet, Social media post

**Consent Form for Participation in a Research Project**

**Title of project:** ***The Psychological Impact on Adult Children Who Have Moved Back Home Due to the Financial Consequences of COVID-19***

**Name of researcher: Danielle dos Reis**

I, ……., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

| | |
|---|---|
| I agree that my participation will remain anonymous | YES/NO |
| I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report | YES/NO |
| I agree that the interview may be video recorded on the online platform used. | YES/NO |
| I agree that the researcher may share my information with his/her supervisor provided my personal details remain anonymous | YES/ NO |
| I agree that the information I provide may be used in an anonymized format after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained. | YES/NO |

…..... (signature of participant)

…..... (name of participant)

…..... (date)

…..... (signature)

…..... (name of the researcher)

…..... (date)

**Participant Information Sheet**

# Participant Information Sheet

**School of Human & Community Development**
**University of the Witwatersrand**
**Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050**

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Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Danielle dos Reis and I am a Masters in Community-Based Counseling Psychology at the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project, and I am investigating *The Psychological Impact on Adult Children Who Have Moved Back Home Due to the Financial Consequences Of COVID-19* under the supervision of Clinical Psychologist Prof. Maria Marchetti-Mercer. The aim of this research project is to determine the psychological impact on adult children who have moved back home as a result of the consequences of the nationwide lockdown.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an online interview via MS Teams or Zoom. This activity will involve a single interview and a possible follow up interview if additional clarity is needed and will be 30-45 minutes long. With your permission, I would also like to video record the interview on the online platform used. This recording will be stored in a folder on my personal laptop that is password protected and only myself and my supervisor will have access to this recording. It will be deleted after 5 years.

There will be no personal costs to you if you participate in this project, you will not receive any direct benefits from participation but there are no disadvantages or penalties if you choose not to participate or if you wish to withdraw from the study at any time. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The information shared in the interview will remain confidential. Anonymity cannot be maintained using the interview process as this will be online however, your identity will remain anonymous as a pseudonym (false name) will be used to represent your participation in my final research report. The information you share with me will be held securely and disclosed only with my supervisor. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we will stop the interview or resume another time. If you need some support or counselling services following the interview, these are available free of charge through the Lifeline Crisis line on 0861 322 322.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report. The data collected from this research project will be stored in a folder on my personal laptop that is password protected and will be kept for 5 years. With your permission the data collected from this research project may be used by other researchers in an anonymized format. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,
Danielle dos Reis

Researcher:
Danielle dos Reis, 1057460@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor: Prof Maria Marchetti-Mercer
Maria Marchetti-Mercer, Maria.Marchetti-Mercer@wits.ac.za

**Social media post**

# RESEARCH VOLUNTEER PARTICIPANTS

**Hi, my name is Danielle dos Reis. I am completing my Masters in Community-Based Counselling Psychology at the University of Witswatersrand. My research study explores the psychological impact of adult children who have moved back home due to the financial consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic.**

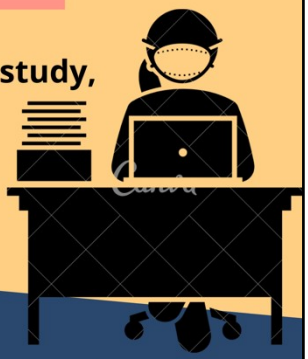
Who can participate in the study?

- Young adults between the ages of 25 - 30 years old and resides in Gauteng.
- Any adult that moved back home to their parental home due to work/financial challenges experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is required of participants?

- Online individual interviews of approximately 45mins
- Data
- Access to Zoom

**If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me on dosreis.danielle5@gmail.com**



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**You are welcome to share the poster and information about the study with anyone who might be interested in participating in the study.**

# Appendix B:

## Interview Questions

1. Where were you living before the lockdown and how long had you being living there?
2. When did you move out of your parents' home ?
3. Please explain your reasons for moving back home.
4. Describe how you experienced the move back home by highlighting any challenges or benefits of moving back home.
5. How did your parents react to you returning home?
6. How did you experience your relationship with your parents during the lockdown and how do you think the move impacted your relationship with them?
7. How would you define adulthood/ what does it mean to be an adult to you?
8. Do you think moving back home impacted upon this?